

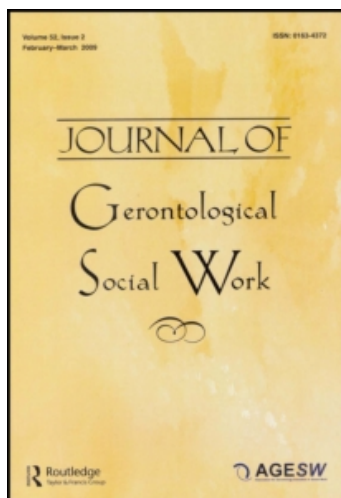
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Who Is Providing Social Services to Today's Older Adults?

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Who Is Providing Social Services to Today's Older Adults? Implications of a Survey of Aging Services Personnel

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ABSTRACT. Characteristics of personnel who provide services to a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse population of older adults were examined through a statewide survey of Area Agencies on Aging and county adult and aging services departments in California. Substantial gaps were found in the professional education and training of current aging services personnel, with only 42% of adult protective service workers, 36% of case managers, and fewer than 10% of other personnel having masters degrees in social work. Key barriers to hiring aging services personnel included a lack of qualified and properly educated applicants, inadequate salaries, and insufficient numbers of ethnically diverse applicants. Results illustrate the lack of professional training among aging services workers and the need to develop programs and incentives for in-

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creasing the number of social workers with adequate knowledge and skills in aging services. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Aging services, personnel needs, social workers, public social services, social work education, gerontological social work, gerontological education, and gerontology training

INTRODUCTION

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 needs of older persons. Particular concern has been expressed regarding the adequacy of aging services, and the availability and training of personnel providing those services. While most attention has been directed towards paraprofessionals or physicians, a number of recent reports have raised serious questions regarding the adequacy of professional social work services for older persons (Council on Social Work Education, 2001; Scharlach et al., 2000; Rosen & Zlotnik, 2001; Dawson & Surpin, 2001; Stone, 2001; Bonder et al., 2001; Blanchette & Flynn, 2001).

The elderly population is growing rapidly. Persons over the age of 65 make up 13% of the U.S. population and by 2040 are expected to reach 21% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). The fastest growing segment of the elderly population is persons over 85 years of age, 46% of whom are disabled (Administration on Aging, 2000). Not only is the population of older adults increasing, but it is extremely diverse. "Between 1990 and 2030 the non-Hispanic, white elderly population (those age 65 and older) is expected to increase by 93 percent, while the older minority population is expected to increase by 328 percent" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996).

California is at the forefront of these changes. The state is home to the largest population of people over 65 years of age compared to all other states and is also the most diverse state other than Hawaii. In California, the population of people over 65 years of age is over 3.5 million and is estimated to increase by 172% over the next 40 years (Lee & Villa, 2000). In 2000 California's elderly population was 70.3%

non-Hispanic white, 14.5% Hispanic, 9.7% Asian and Pacific Islander, 5% Black and 0.5% American Indian, however, by 2040 non-Hispanic whites will only make up 46% of the elderly in California (Lee & Villa, 2000). These figures are causing administrators, practitioners, and consumers of aging services to question the preparedness of aging policies, programs and personnel to meet the demands of this growing population.

As the elderly population increases and places greater demands on public aging services, it is essential to assess the adequacy of those services and the personnel who provide them. This paper examines personnel needs in aging services, based on a statewide survey of Area Agencies on Aging and county adult and aging services departments in California. Current and future personnel needs in aging services in California are examined, including implications for social work services and public programs, hiring practices, and training and education for gerontological social workers.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN AGING SERVICES

Increasing numbers of older adults have complex conditions marked by chronic physical or mental health problems, comorbidities, and problematic personal, interpersonal, social, and economic situations. These complex conditions warrant comprehensive multi-dimensional assessments, as well as assistance accessing and paying for community resources—a combination of services typically described as case management. Indeed, case managers combine assessment skills and a knowledge of resources to develop care plans responsive to client needs (Austin, 1990; Challis, 1999). Evaluation regarding the effectiveness of case management suggests that older individuals receiving services are less likely to receive institutional care in addition to experiencing an improved quality of life along with their caregivers (Challis, 1993).

Good case management requires the ability to address both instrumental and psychological issues and to access tangible resources, while helping clients to develop solutions to their problems (Nelson, 1995b; Challis, 1999). These are complicated skills requiring substantial training and expertise. Research suggests that workers lacking professional training and skills may neglect essential aspects of assessment and case management, such as client self-determination and related ethical issues, possibly resulting in poor care planning (Morrow-Howell, 1992).

Social workers are particularly well-suited to provide the case management and related services needed by disabled older adults. Social workers' education and training focus on the complex nature of human problems, including the interface among physical, mental and social aspects of individuals (Rosen & Zlotnik, 2001; Vourlekis & Greene, 1992). Social workers also are trained to assist clients and their families to navigate through the various fragmented, poorly coordinated, and complex health, mental health and social service systems (Nelson, 1995a; Austin, 1990; Lens & Pollack, 1999).

Social workers are apt to be especially effective in responding to the needs of the growing numbers of older persons who suffer from abuse or neglect (Tomita, 2000; Cyphers, 1999; Penhale, 1993). Social workers receive special training regarding the assessment and treatment of involuntary clients and pathological family dynamics (Atkinson & Nelson, 1995). The National Association of Social Workers, moreover, provides a set of distinct professional values and ethics, including mutual responsibility, confidentiality, and self-determination, which guide social workers in resolving the ethical challenges typically faced with elderly persons experiencing abuse, neglect, or other complex physical, psychological, or social vulnerabilities (Vourlekis & Greene, 1992).

Elder abuse and neglect are of particular concern in California, which in 1998 introduced mandatory procedures for reporting elder abuse and required county adult protective services (APS) departments to respond to all reports (California State Assembly, 1998). As a result, the demand for adult protective services has increased dramatically, requiring a near doubling of APS positions in some counties (Counihan, 2001).

AGING SERVICES PERSONNEL IN PUBLIC SOCIAL SERVICES

Despite the increased need for social workers in aging services, there is a substantial shortage of social workers with professional training to work with older clients. It has been estimated that 60,000 to 70,000 social workers are currently needed to provide aging services (NIA, 1987), whereas only about 5,000 of the 155,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers claim aging as their primary field of practice (Rosen & Zlotnik, 2001).

There is little existing research on the background and training of current aging services personnel or the barriers to hiring qualified workers. One of the few studies to address these issues was a 1990 survey of

adult services social workers, supervisors and administrators in county social service departments in North Carolina (CARES, 1990). Overall, only 5.2 percent of responding county social service workers held a masters degree in social work. Problems identified by survey respondents included: funding, service gaps; administrative support; bureaucracy; service coordination; salaries; education; interagency cooperation; and hiring and promotion of minority workers.

In an effort to update these findings and examine the unique personnel needs occasioned by California's large and highly diverse elderly population, the Center for the Advanced Study of Aging Services (CASAS) at the University of California, Berkeley, with support from the University of California's California Policy Research Center (CPRC), conducted a statewide survey of personnel in public aging services departments. The CASAS personnel survey sought to identify the characteristics of aging services personnel in California, as well as current barriers to hiring sufficient numbers of professionally-trained social workers in aging services.

METHODS

A survey was developed to collect information regarding the characteristics of aging services workers in public agencies in California, as well as current workforce demands and anticipated future workforce needs. The survey included questions about current worker characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, education and training), number and types of current vacancies, barriers to filling positions, and desired changes in state policies or programs that would help to meet future personnel needs in aging services. The survey instrument was limited to one double-sided page in order to maximize response rates. The survey methodology was modeled upon a study of child welfare personnel in California conducted every three years by the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) (Perry, Limb, Rogers, & Dickinson, 1999).

The survey was distributed at the Annual Meeting of the California Association of Area Agencies on Aging (C4A) to all directors of Area Agencies on Aging in California and other conference participants. The survey also was mailed to all directors of departments of adult and aging services or relevant department managers in each of California's 58 counties, using information provided by the County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) and the C4A. A follow-up letter with a survey attached was sent by mail or electronic mail to non-re-

spondents three weeks after the surveys were originally distributed. In addition, follow-up calls were initiated to clarify confusing or incomplete information reported on the surveys. 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.

RESULTS

Analysis of the survey responses revealed tremendous variation in the types of programs offered and the number of masters-level social workers employed in the various programs. Of the 55 responding agencies, 78 percent included an APS program, 82 percent 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 the client can remain in their own home), 40 percent provided case management, and 56 percent provided information and referral or other programs, such as financial assistance, housing assistance, mental health services, nutrition, senior employment, and public guardian.

The total number of aging services personnel among the 55 responding agencies was 3,270. The median number of aging services personnel in freestanding AAAs was 10.5; in freestanding county departments the median number of personnel was 9; and in county departments co-located with AAAs the median number of personnel was 68. The median is reported here because it more accurately reflects the central tendency of the sample due to the large numbers of reported aging services personnel in some counties. Females comprised 75 percent of aging services personnel, consistent with national data indicating that 72 to 79 percent of social workers are female (Barth, 2001). 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 racial and ethnic composition of the state's overall population for non-Hispanic whites, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b). However, African Americans, representing 6.2% of the general state population, were over-represented in this sample, while Hispanics and Latinos, who

make up 28.1 percent of the general population, were under-represented (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b).

In general, substantial gaps were found in the professional education and training of the state's aging services personnel. In adult protective services, where advanced assessment and intervention skills are needed, only 42 percent of the workers had an MSW; 36 percent of case managers had an MSW; 4 percent of In-home Support Services workers had an MSW; 6 percent of Information and Referral workers had an MSW; and 12 percent of workers in various other programs had an MSW.

The lack of master's level experience and training among aging services workers was further demonstrated by the MSW requirements of vacant positions. An MSW was required for only 35 percent of current APS vacancies and only 50 percent of vacant case management positions. No MSW was required for any of the vacancies in IHSS, Information and Referral, or other programs.

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

Respondents also were asked for policy and program recommendations that would help to meet their agency's current and future personnel needs in aging services. Many respondents suggested developing programs to recruit and train aging service workers, including increasing the emphasis of gerontology in university courses and programs. Also suggested were incentives and training programs for professional development of staff with and without MSWs, in order to decrease the consequences related to the high numbers of aging services staff who do not have a MSW and do not have adequate gerontology experience. As might be expected, many survey respondents recommended that more funding be allocated to aging services, especially to be used for salaries.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that public aging services may not have sufficient numbers of personnel with the education and training necessary to respond to the needs of a growing aging population. Although this study found a higher percentage of masters-level social

workers in aging services than did the 1990 North Carolina study, a relatively low percentage of workers with an MSW persists and continues to be an indication of the potential lack of skill and education among aging services personnel.

This lack of professionally trained social workers could have a potentially negative impact on aging services. Workers without professional training are likely to overlook critical aspects of the client's situation in the assessment process (Morrow-Howell, 1992). This could result in inadequate care plans that do not fully meet clients' needs. Workers with less professional training may not be adequately prepared to handle ethical issues such as client self-determination, or to help clients navigate complex funding and service delivery systems. Professionally-trained social workers, on the other hand, are more likely than paraprofessionals to provide effective case management services for clients with complex problems (Challis, 1999; National Chronic Care Consortium, 2000).

The barriers to hiring professionally trained social workers most often identified include the small pool of available MSW social workers with training in aging, the lack of ethnically and culturally competent professionals, and the inadequate salaries available to social workers. It has been estimated that 60,000 to 70,000 social workers currently are needed to provide aging services (NIA, 1987), whereas only about 5,000 of the 155,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers claim aging as their primary field of practice (Rosen & Zlotnik, 2001). Moreover, only about 3% of social work students specialize in geriatric social work during their MSW training, and perhaps only another 2% take any classes at all in social work with older adults (Scharlach et al., 2000; Damron-Rodriguez, Villa, Tseng, & Lubben, 1997). Furthermore, the curriculum of most social work schools lacks aging content (Scharlach et al., 2000), with the majority of social work programs offering fewer than two elective courses related to aging (Damron-Rodriguez, Villa, Tseng, & Lubben, 1997).

With the growth of the aging population, MSW students specializing in other areas of social work such as health, mental health and children and families also find themselves working with elderly clients and their family members (Council on Social Work Education, 2001; Greene, 1990; Scharlach et al., 2000). In a survey of the continuing education needs for social workers in the field of aging, Greene (1990) found that nearly three-fourths of the 2,000 study participants were working in another practice area before beginning aging-related work. Another survey of the educational and training needs of professionals providing

services to Alaskan elderly found that 91.8 percent of respondents felt that they needed more training in gerontology in order to provide better services to Alaskan older adults (Rosich & Thompson, 1997). These studies affirm the need for greater opportunities for gerontological social work education, during the MSW program and as continuing education.

Also among the key barriers to hiring personnel is the need for a greater number of ethnic and culturally competent staff, identified by 40 percent of respondents. Professionally-trained social workers also are more likely to be skilled in culturally-competent interventions and treatments that will possibly result in more successful outcomes with an increasingly diverse population of older adults (Bonder, Martin, & Miracle, 2001).

As indicated by 70 percent of the survey respondents, adequate salaries also are essential for attracting professionally-trained social workers. Findings such as this confirm Callahan's assertion that wages, work conditions, and training of social workers need to be improved (Callahan, 2001). If social workers are not appropriately compensated, there are other alternative occupations available that complement social workers' skill set, such as counseling, teaching, management, administration, and human resources, which may offer wages nearly 20 percent greater than those in social work (Barth, 2001), while often providing relief from large caseloads and service arrangement functions that may not adequately utilize professional social work skills (Morrow-Howell, 1992).

The shortage of professionally trained social workers with knowledge and skills in aging services has prompted a number of recent efforts to develop programs to recruit and provide incentives for individuals to receive MSW degrees and to enter aging services. Foremost among these has been the Geriatric Social Work Initiative of the John A. Hartford Foundation. In collaboration with social work education programs the Geriatric Social Work Initiative seeks to enhance the gerontology skills of current and future social workers through three main strategies: faculty development, curriculum enhancement, and gerontology-rich training experiences. Hartford-sponsored faculty development initiatives include a Faculty Scholars Program, which provides mentorship and gerontological research training for promising new social work faculty, and a Doctoral Fellows Program, which offers doctoral dissertation grants, career guidance, professional development and networking opportunities. Hartford-sponsored curriculum enhancement initiatives include a Faculty Development Program, which offers one- and four-day institutes on developing and implementing gerontological curriculum in

social work courses, a Geriatric Enrichment Program, which supports gerontological curriculum transformation in 70 BSW and MSW programs nationally, and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Strengthening Aging and Gerontology Education for Social Work Project (SAGE-SW), which provides educational resources and technical assistance to schools of social work to improve gerontological social work education nationally. High-quality gerontology-rich training experiences are promoted through a Practicum Partnership Initiative, which fosters development of local consortia among academic programs and preeminent field training sites and provides practicum scholarships and funding for educational tools.

One example of a project supported by the John A. Hartford Foundation Practicum Partnership Initiative is the Consortium for Social Work Training in Aging (CSWTA), which is coordinated by the University of California at Berkeley and includes three schools of social work and six county governments. CSWTA provides stipends to MSW students in the San Francisco Bay Area who participate in a structured training program involving field experiences in a number of county aging services departments and attendance at seminars and conferences addressing aging-related topics. An evaluation of the program's first year provided early evidence of the program's effectiveness in training and retaining social work students for work in the field of aging. Participants' knowledge of aging and aging services increased, and 13 of the 14 students said they were likely to take a job in aging after graduation (Robinson et al., 2001). Furthermore, participating county agencies reported improved ability to train staff and students and increased interest in hiring masters-level social workers (Robinson et al., 2001).

Efforts specifically targeted to increasing minority participation in the field of gerontological social work have included a collaborative program based at Hunter College (Asamoah, Haffey, & Hodges, 1992). This model program covered tuition expenses for 19 experienced practitioners to enter an MSW program that allowed them to maintain their current jobs while receiving MSW field experience and managerial skills training within the agency. To supplement the MSW educational program and provide networking opportunities, the program arranged for mentors for all students as well as seminars related to minority issues, aging policy and service issues, and management skills and career development. All students who completed the program planned to continue working in gerontology. In addition, students felt that the MSW degree earned through the collaborative program was professionally empowering and enhanced their status, respect and level of responsibility.

Replicating collaborative programs such as these could be achieved through creation of a program similar to the federally-funded child welfare training programs offered by numerous social work schools throughout the country. 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 fieldwork within public child welfare agencies. Students are also required to make a commitment to work in public child welfare services for two years post-graduation. Many survey respondents suggested the creation of a program similar to this for public aging services, so as to enhance the numbers and competence of students interested in gerontological social work.

CONCLUSION

This statewide survey of public programs serving the elderly provided a preliminary view of personnel needs in the field of aging services. While this study focused on the professional social work training of aging services staff, future research is needed to examine other types of preparation, such as certificates in gerontology or masters or doctorate level degrees in gerontology or related fields. Also, racial and ethnic information were gathered regarding staff but not regarding the clients served, making it impossible to know how well the diversity among the agency staff corresponded to the diversity within the client population. Despite these limitations, the research findings have provided important new information about personnel in public aging services in California. Overall survey results suggest the necessity for gerontology training to create a more skilled and qualified work force in aging services, the need for increased recognition of the value of professional education and training in gerontology, and the need to make education more available to non-White and Hispanic groups in order to promote racial and ethnic diversity among aging services professionals. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to program and policy changes that foster a larger and more competent work force in aging services, as well as improved services to older adults.

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