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CURRENT TRAINING NEEDS IN PUBLIC SOCIAL SERVICES:
IMPACT ON SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

An empirically based study was designed to identify evolving training needs in public social services agencies which are in transition. The characteristics and capacity of these service delivery systems have been significantly altered by funding reductions and subsequent administrative redesign. Schools of social work preparing MSW's for future professional employment and also responsible for operating Title XX training projects need to be sensitive to emerging trends. Specific areas of skills and knowledge requiring greater educational and training emphasis were reported. Curricula planning and development needs to be responsive as social work roles and responsibilities are changing in the marketplace. Concern for both faculty attitudes and inadequate emphasis on public social services at the graduate level was voiced by Title XX managers.

INTRODUCTION

Recent political and economic developments are changing the scope and character of the public social services delivery system which has been funded under Title XX. Recently some of the chief indicators of these changes and their implications have been studied and reported (Terrell, 1981). Program effects, including staff reductions, higher caseloads, decline in staff morale, elimination of particular services, etc. have been documented in public social services agencies in one state (Stumpf and Terrell, 1979; Terrell and Weisner, 1980). These effects seriously impact the quality and nature of the services being delivered, the specific populations able to receive services, and the system's capability to reduce social problems. Predictably, new social work roles are emerging, some traditional tasks and functions are changing, and new staff responsibilities are being emphasized. While public social services agencies are learning to adapt to austerity, educational and training programs need to assess carefully the evolving structure in order to reconceptualize their role and determine how to provide the maximum degree of support.

Schools of social work have traditionally prepared MSW students for employment in a broad range of social work settings but with the knowledge that public social services agencies

have been one of the largest employers of their graduates. Curricular planning and field placement arrangements can be influenced by significant changes in the operation of these public agencies. Not only are graduate social work programs impacted but also affected are Title XX training projects operated by schools of social work to train public social services employees. Because of these specific responsibilities and their professional role in the community, schools of social work need to remain aware of models and techniques that are being endorsed and practiced by public social services agencies and need to consider the implications for graduate education and Title XX training.

To provide relevant information for planning purposes, a survey of public social services agencies throughout California was conducted to accomplish several objectives:

- 1) To investigate and identify new trends in service delivery, roles and responsibilities of social work staff, and emerging training needs in public social services agencies.
- 2) To provide data to assist educational planners concerned with updating graduate social work curricula.
- 3) To inform planning and curriculum development processes in Title XX training projects.

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory study was designed to gather data describing emerging educational and training needs in public social services agencies which would directly or indirectly impact schools of social work. For data collection purposes, a survey questionnaire was constructed to respond to the research objectives. Pretesting this instrument with Staff Development Officers from two County Title XX agencies resulted in several modifications but confirmed the overall clarity and effectiveness of the survey instrument in eliciting useful information. During June, 1981, questionnaires and return envelopes were mailed to Training Officers of Title XX agencies in all 58 counties in California. The purpose of the study and instructions for completing the questionnaire were defined explicitly in an accompanying letter.

The survey instrument contained three major sections-- Identifying Information, Training Needs in Title XX Agencies, and Graduate Social Work Education. The section on "Training Needs" was designed to reflect significant agency changes that were affecting service delivery and were provoking the creation of new staff roles and responsibilities. Respondents were also asked to identify new and emerging training needs related to these changes and to list any specific type of

training that was currently being requested by staff. In addition, agencies were asked how university based Title XX Training Projects could improve their service to meet agency needs. Responses to questions in this section were divided under several headings--Children's Services, Adult Services and Other. 'Other' referred to miscellaneous services which are generally mandated in California, e.g., Employment Services, I&R, but not including Income Maintenance.

In the section on "Graduate Social Work Education," respondents were asked to identify areas of skills and knowledge which they felt required new or increased emphasis in graduate education. Specific questions were also included to elicit the perspective of the Title XX agency in respect to strengths and deficiencies of MSW's as Title XX employees.

Data analysis consisted of utilizing aspects of content analysis to categorize, interpret, and present the findings in an organized and comprehensive manner. Findings cannot be generalized due to the limited geographical sample but are considered to be representative of developments taking place in public social services agencies in California.

FINDINGS

A return rate of 21% (12 counties) of completed questionnaires reflected the pressing concerns of Title XX agencies and their staff development sections which are struggling to meet the current challenges of reduced staffing levels and redesign of service delivery. (This assumption was affirmed by several non-responding agencies which complained of lack of staff time to participate in this research.) However, respondents represented a broad geographic spectrum of the state including two of the three large urban areas, a number of medium sized urban areas, and both large and small rural counties. A mix of training officers and management level staff participated in completing questionnaires. Data were summarized according to specific areas of inquiry.

Agency changes and new trends

Specific operational and structural changes frequently cited by agencies as resulting in new staff roles and responsibilities included the following: budgetary limitations; administrative reorganization; redesign of services; pressure for greater accountability; staff reductions; higher case-loads; and state and federal regulations changes. Case planning and intervention strategies have evolved significantly following these trends. Virtually all respondents reported having operationalized a time-limited, goal-directed framework for the provision of social services. Intervention goals focused on acute problems while services tended to be

concrete and crisis-oriented rather than preventive or long-term.

Several relatively new areas of service delivery were provoking changes in staffing patterns. Title XX agencies in California were required under state regulations to establish Emergency Response Systems that operate 24 hours per day and seven days per week to respond to child abuse and neglect situations. This program has necessitated creative and differential use of already limited staff. Permanency Planning is a program concept for Foster Care being emphasized at the state level which requires retraining and refocusing of casework efforts. More court-related social work activity permeates the responses from both large and small counties. Dependency cases, i.e., dependent wards of the court not considered delinquents, are being increasingly supervised by social services in lieu of Probation departments. This responsibility requires particular knowledge and skills not always included in the social worker's repertoire. A broader approach to contracting out for services is being debated at local political levels while it is being implemented in some specific programs, e.g., In Home Supportive Services (IHSS). Smaller counties are beginning to integrate administratively social and other human services as a cost-saving measure. In addition to these services, widespread administrative reorganization has caused specific service programs to reconceptualize their roles and target populations.

New functions in Children's Services included increasing responsibilities related to legal procedures and court actions, i.e., report writing, investigations, knowledge of the implications of complex juvenile laws, and court room decorum. Case management roles were being stressed with specific functions to include brokering, coordinating, and monitoring needed services. Preventive services and non-court mandated child welfare services were receiving less emphasis. Although a few of the smaller counties were indicating a continuing provision of some of the traditional preventive services of outreach, community development, and work with families, this approach contrasted with most other counties which are stressing a reduction in the scope of services offered and rapid resolution of case situations. All respondents indicated a greater emphasis on accountability activities as reflected in case planning, goal setting, and case outcomes. Greater administrative responsibilities for supervisors were noted in a few instances. Finally, the Children's Services area reported a greater emphasis on the concept of teamwork between workers, foster and natural parents, children, paraprofessionals, and volunteers.

Changing roles and responsibilities in the Adult Services reflected many of the major trends indicated for Children's Services. Generally, adult service workers are facing challenges of resolving more serious protective cases in shorter time-spans. Working with difficult and hostile clients was

seen as presenting a particularly challenging problem. In Home Supportive Services, i.e., personal and chore services for disabled adults and the elderly, is a very sensitive area in California due to the funding crisis. Service workers are having to develop intervention strategies to help clients remain independent with reduced levels of services. In the growing function of case management, adult workers are having more interaction with a broad range of voluntary agencies in the community which provide services to seniors. Adult Services also is coping with increasing responsibilities for court related matters especially involving conservatorship cases. Reduced mental health funding is resulting in high caseloads of conservatees which create ethical dilemmas of where to focus casework efforts, i.e., mentally ill adults, disabled, or older institutionalized individuals.

In "Other" areas, respondents reported new responsibilities in understanding and utilizing data processing equipment, learning job development procedures, and providing brief, but effective, I&R services often by telephone.

New training needs

When requested to identify training needs which have become important recently, respondents in both Children's and Adult Services reported training topics related to emerging trends in social services. Most frequently mentioned were accountability, case management, court/legal related issues, short-term casework, and making appropriate referrals. In order to make brief casework more effective, special skill areas were stressed: accurate assessments; contracting with clients; developing appropriate behavioral objectives; and time-limited, problem focused, goal directed intervention activities. Children's Services were particularly emphasizing training related to Permanency Planning, Reunification Planning, Crisis Intervention, and working with problems involving domestic violence and sexual abuse. New training needs in Adult Services included learning how to limit IHSS, building knowledge in areas of mental problems, working with substance abuse, and understanding the problems of the aged. Another significant training need focused on skills development in working with depressed and severely disabled adults. In "Other" areas, a major training need identified by most agencies was for stress reduction/burnout. Other important concerns related to cultural awareness and utilizing volunteers.

When asked to predict future training needs, respondents essentially reiterated needs which reflected current trends. However, several innovative areas were mentioned which underline the concern for developing new resources to replace eroded services. Examples included: community networking;

greater utilization of paraprofessionals, volunteers, and family members; increased interdisciplinary coordination; and utilizing community resources to a greater degree. Children's Services particularly stressed more training in legal areas and team building. Adult Services highlighted the growing emphasis on problems of the elderly and the need for increasing knowledge and skills training in that area. The "Other" category contributed two key areas--a growing need for more stress management and computer training.

In response to the question about current staff preferences for training, priorities of social service staff seemed more focused on specific skills training than on techniques of accountability and brief treatment. Staff was requesting training related to their responsibilities with juvenile court procedures, principles of case management, working with cases of child sexual abuse, techniques of assessment, understanding the problems of the elderly, and working with difficult and resistive clients. Another recurring training theme for workers was the problem of professional burnout and the need to learn stress management techniques.

When asked how university based Title XX training projects could better serve the needs of public social services agencies, respondents' basic concerns related to either particular training programs or more fundamental questions of administrative relationships and communication. Better coordination was desired between the university's Title XX training project and agency staff plus sharing a greater role in all phases of developing the training plan. Several respondents also felt that university Title XX project staff needed to demonstrate greater interest and involvement in their working relationship. In addition, improved services which university Title XX projects could perform were identified and included developing effective research methods to evaluate the impact of training on staff performance, producing A/V materials that agencies could continue to use for training purposes, providing courses on training for trainers, planning one day workshops rather than 2-3 days, and creating part-time MSW degree programs located at the work site.

Graduate social work education

Respondents were also asked to consider specific areas where they felt schools of social work needed to increase the educational emphasis. Several themes were prevalent in a majority of the replies. New MSW's need to be prepared for rapidly changing roles in public social services and for stressful working conditions including high caseloads, difficult cases, and limited agency resources. These conditions will require greater ability in goal-directed, time-limited interventions. Case management and refined assessment skills will be needed as well as some familiarity with accountability and effectiveness measures. Basic casework skills continue

to be important along with specific knowledge in legal aspects of child welfare and conservatorship. Schools need to devote more attention to the issues and skills related to working with non-voluntary, sometimes hostile, clients. Cultural awareness and its implications for service delivery in all programs need to be integrated throughout the curriculum. Some exposure to social services administration, supervision, and data processing would be very useful for employment in evolving Title XX agencies.

Another question was targeted at identifying areas of perceived deficiencies in skills or knowledge of MSW's working in public social services agencies. Again, a broad range of areas was identified. One frequently mentioned deficiency was the ability to adjust to working in a public agency, i.e., knowledge of bureaucracies, working effectively under pressure, dealing with a difficult client population and, generally, having more realistic expectations. Other frequently mentioned MSW deficiencies were related to current agency needs: case management; some legal background, especially in juvenile law; and ability in using generic casework process and skills including formulating behavioral objectives, utilizing effectiveness measures, and writing reports. Other deficiencies noted included a lack of cultural awareness, insufficient group work skills, and inability to use the authority role.

The final question asked agency Training Officers to indicate particular areas of strength or expertise that MSW's bring to Title XX agencies. Predictably, some responses contraindicated 'deficiencies' noted above revealing the range of prevailing perceptions. A significant theme running through responses to this question described the professional values, ethics, and commitment MSW's bring to their work in public social services. Respondents also indicated that MSW's appeared to be eager to learn and adapt and could be flexible. They also were reported to bring a good conceptual framework of social work practice and broad knowledge of social, cultural, and environmental influence to the job. A positive note was sounded from one rural county:

MSW's who have "pulled it together" have linked their academic knowledge with the practicum. They have less difficulty doing assessments; they are willing to take risks; they have strong, flexible egos that make it possible to deal with other professionals (i.e., psychiatrists and other MD's, psychologists, lawyers and judges); they have breadth as well as depth in their practice.

CWDA Sub-Committee Report

An additional management perspective was contributed in the form of a recent California Welfare Director's Association (CWDA) sub-committee report on MSW programs. This report

consisted of a listing of critical areas where MSW programs were perceived to be deficient in preparing graduate students for public social services employment. Some of the areas cited duplicated data reported in this study, e.g., knowledge of juvenile law and court procedures, and do not require further elaboration. Additional concerns focused on specific areas of knowledge and skills which were felt to receive insufficient emphasis:

knowledge--developmental growth and behavior; nutrition; economics of poverty; human sexuality; child protective services; geriatrics; parenting; administration and bureaucratic organization; working within the system for constructive change; data processing systems; quality control

skills-- working with children and adolescents; group work; family therapy; use of authority; development of community resources; rural social work; decision making

Beyond the curriculum areas, CWDA addressed the operational aspects of graduate programs. More flexibility was recommended in both waiving fundamental courses in light of prior experience and in providing students the opportunity to take more interdisciplinary courses. In addition, social work faculty need to increase their basic understanding of and concern for public welfare. It was felt that their knowledge and attitude toward public agencies significantly affected graduate students' professional development. Finally, in view of economic difficulties and diminished opportunities for stipends, graduate programs need to develop alternative degree programs with the practicum arranged on-site at the public agency in order to enable greater participation in graduate education.

DISCUSSION

Curiously, very little has appeared in the literature linking the educational and training needs of public social services and graduate social work education despite the numbers of MSW's who have been employed in Title XX agencies. During this period of significant change for human services programs, new roles and responsibilities for MSW's are rapidly evolving in the public social services arena. Understanding that schools of social work have a broader mission than to meet the needs of a particular field of practice, the changing nature of service delivery, nevertheless, requires that new professionals be prepared to apply defined areas of skills and knowledge in their work settings. In a limited employment market, only the most qualified job-seekers will be competitive for fewer job openings. While it is true that on-site training

can provide specialized information and procedural techniques, conceptualization and integration of new skills and knowledge can best take place within a structured learning environment. Schools of social work have a responsibility not only to integrate research findings, new theory, and knowledge into the graduate curriculum but also to address relevant topical areas and practice methodologies which reflect current service delivery approaches.

This exploratory study has examined several dimensions of educational and training needs related to changes occurring in public social services. Although based on a limited sample of Title XX agencies, the findings provide substantial data which sketch some of the emerging trends in service delivery and the roles and responsibilities of social work staff. These findings are relevant for informing both social work curriculum development processes and Title XX training project planning and resource development initiatives. Specific areas of skills and knowledge requiring greater educational and training emphasis were identified.

Findings revealed that use of brief, task- and crisis-oriented models of practice including explicit methods for demonstrating the achievement of case goals was essential for performing effectively in the highly pressurized environment of the public social services agency. In addition, budgetary limitations are coercing many of these public agencies to accept only the more critical and difficult social problems for service activity. Therefore, graduate students who may become employed in public social services need understanding and experience with acute problems such as sexual abuse of children, substance abuse, domestic violence, protection of aged and disabled, and severe mental illness. They also need to have some basic acquaintance with court related responsibilities, experience in utilizing case management techniques, and greater understanding of the role of cultural influences in social functioning. The changing context of practice in public agencies requires greater tolerance for stressful working conditions and the flexibility to perform effectively in a variety of roles.

In respect to these latter concerns which are not limited to public agencies, graduate students need to develop purposeful and effective self-management techniques to cope successfully with the pressures of challenging workloads. In addition, from management's perspective, MSW's do not have sufficient background in understanding public social services agencies and their characteristics, i.e., goals, funding, policy perspectives, operational aspects, target populations and their social problems. Including this area more systematically in the graduate curriculum, managers feel, would not only increase basic understanding but could help improve overall attitudes toward public agencies and their mission. This

concern was also raised in a previous study (Grinnell and Kyte, 1977) which called for a reappraisal of how public social services was presented in graduate social work curricula.

The continuing viability of Title XX training projects is uncertain as funding sources are shifting. Throughout the country it has been demonstrated, especially since the advent of Title XX, that schools of social work can provide effective training programs for staff and management of public social services agencies. During the next several years as public agencies adjust to changing priorities and resources, there will be an even greater need for training input from professional schools of social work. Some of these training areas have been identified in this study and others will emerge over time. Training needs assessment is referred to in a comprehensive report on public social services training as "the most crucial but also the most neglected" area in the training process (Administration for Public Services, 1980). The training capacity and expertise which graduate schools have developed over the last decade are vitally needed by public agencies and should be utilized on a continuing basis.

This is a difficult and challenging time indeed for public social services. Administrative redesign and reconceptualization of service delivery methods are occurring in order to be able to address the most acute community social problems. Further modifications will undoubtedly result from the process of implementing reduced funding allocations to states packaged in the form of block grants. The concept of rationing social services is becoming a reality (Coulton and Rosenberg, 1981). The role assigned to education and training in all likelihood will not be consistent but will be differentially determined in the various states and regions.

At this critical juncture, schools of social work need to reaffirm their support and working relationships with public social services agencies. Further study and insight are needed to examine the role of graduate programs in preparing MSW's for employment in practice settings whose purposes as well as tasks and functions are currently in transition. This concern relates not only to the curriculum development process but to the professional concern for the impact of reduced levels of social services on vulnerable populations. Fundamentally, professional social work education is a dynamic process which relies on an esoteric body of knowledge and theory for its substance but which also needs to be responsive to the evolving nature of social needs and problems and service delivery models.

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