

# *Social Work Workforce*

## **General Background**

Social workers are key resources for the nation's most vulnerable populations—providing a safety net of services to older adults, neglected and abused children, and people at high risk for disparate health and behavioral health service access, treatment and outcomes. During the War on Poverty, the United States government demonstrated its commitment to preserving the safety net and to the social work profession. Now, however, many of those social workers who served our country are preparing for retirement and the social work workforce is contracting.

Although social work is one of the professions expected to grow at a much faster than average rate through 2016 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the profession faces real challenges to its ability to recruit new social workers, retain the current workforce, and replace retiring social workers.<sup>1</sup>

BLS estimated the need for 595,000 social workers in 2006 and predicts that the need for social workers will increase to 727,000 social workers by 2016.

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Center for Workforce Studies, however, there is a looming shortage of social workers.<sup>2</sup> A shrinking professional workforce coupled with a significantly increasing demand for social work services will negatively affect the 10 million clients social workers serve every day.

In response to these workforce challenges, NASW launched the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative to secure federal and state investments in professional social work to enhance societal well-being. The initiative addresses state-level issues such as professional title protection, public education, and reimbursement, as well as federal issues such as loan forgiveness, social worker safety, research, and training.

NASW is also working in support of the *Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act* which establishes a Social Work Reinvestment Commission to provide a comprehensive analysis of current trends including fair market compensation, high educational debt, workforce trends, diversity, and research within the academic and professional social work communities.

## **Recommendations**

- Reduce educational debt for social workers through loan forgiveness. As many as 37 percent of public 4-year graduates have too much debt to manage on a starting social work salary.<sup>3</sup>
- Assure safety for social workers. According to the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, 70 percent of case workers report that front line staff in their agencies had been victims of violence or had received threats of violence.<sup>4</sup>

- Enhance social work salaries. Due to high loan debt and low income, too many social workers are providing services to clients in need and are themselves struggling financially.
- Fund social work research. Currently, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) devotes less than one percent of its research budget to social work research, despite the fact that social work research finds solutions to some of society's most pressing problems.
- Expand the Pell Grant program as described in the 2010 budget plan. This is an important program that will help many financially needy students achieve their academic goals. Many social work students will be able to take full advantage of this program as they often find it difficult to afford the high cost of college education.
- Support legislation that will provide funding for training, tuition assistance and loan forgiveness for social workers. It is critical that Congress fully fund the loan forgiveness provisions in the recently passed Higher Education Act (P.L. 110-315), which provides loan forgiveness for social workers in child welfare, school counselors, and mental health providers that work with certain populations.

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#### References

- <sup>1</sup> NASW Center for Workforce Studies (2009). *Workforce trends affecting the social work profession*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- <sup>2</sup> Whitaker, T., Weismiller, T., & Clark, E. (2006). *Assuring the sufficiency of a frontline workforce: A national study of licensed social workers. Executive summary*. Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers.
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Public Interest Research Group (2006). Retrieved on December 17, 2007 from [www.uspirg.org/higher-education/student-debt](http://www.uspirg.org/higher-education/student-debt).
- <sup>4</sup> American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees AFSCME. (1998). *Double Jeopardy: Caseworkers at Risk Helping at Risk Kids*. Washington, DC: AFSCME Public Policy Office.

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#### Additional Resources

National Association of Social Workers. (2009). *Social Work Reinvestment Initiative*. [www.socialworkreinvestment.org](http://www.socialworkreinvestment.org).

National Association of Social Workers. (2009). *Women in the Social Work Profession. Social work speaks: National Association of Social Workers policy statement, 2009-2012* (8th ed., pp. 359-366). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

National Association of Social Workers Center for Workforce Studies. (2009). *Workforce Trends Affecting the Profession*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.