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Social Work and the Reagan Era: Challenges to the Profession

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A priority item on the Reagan administration's social policy agenda was the creation of a charity model of welfare, in which well-meaning volunteers provide services to the deserving poor and for-profit enterprises cater to the middle and upper class. This model was implemented because human service budgets of public agencies were slashed and subsidies reduced for the not-for-profit sector. This reduction resulted in substantial unmet needs for social services, which have not been adequately addressed.

The authors contend that the profession of social work was not as directly affected by these changes as may be surmised since professional social workers did not constitute a large part of the public social service labor farce. Increased advocacy is recommended as part of the solution.

The impact of the Reagan era on this country's human services has been well documented. Funding was reduced, with consequent changes in the social service infrastructure, and ideological support built over the decades was significantly altered.

Although the challenges to the social work profession were many, they were not as direct, immediate, or fundamental as they were to the public social services targeted. To demonstrate this point, it is important to examine the historical development of the profession and the primary ideology of the Reagan era.

This article examines the size and centrality of the profession of social work to public social services before and after the Reagan era and the trickle down effect on the not-for-profit

services. Strategies to reduce the severity of future policies and funding cuts are described.

Development of the Profession: Charity to professionalism (1880–1980)

Social work had its beginnings in the friendly visitors of the settlement houses and the Charity Organization Societies, and in the activists who founded and staffed these early not-for profit organizations. Consequently, in the early days social work was synonymous with charity and volunteerism. However, with industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, city and community problems became more complex and family life more separated from work and less well supported.

Formally organized services emerged, creating the increased need for training for service deliverers which contributed to the establishment of the early schools of social work. With the depression of 1929, publicly funded social services began. They were strengthened and expanded twice more, in the 1960s and the 1970s: first with the enactment of the Economic Opportunity Act and the Community Mental Health Centers Act, and then with the passage of the Title XX amendments to the Social Security Act. Such expansions broadened the support and funding for social services, but did not include professional social workers either in the policy making process or in actual service delivery (Reeser & Epstein, 1991 p. 15).

Although the profession may have viewed these sweeping bills as opening new vistas, opportunities, and roles for professional social workers, in fact, there were insufficient numbers of Masters in Social Work (MSWs) to even begin to fill these new positions. By the late 1960s, there were only 70 graduate schools of social work in the United States, producing approximately 5,600 MSWs annually (Council on Social Work Education, 1971). Therefore, the profession was unable to fill all of the direct service delivery positions available. Similarly, policy making positions might have included social workers trained at the doctoral level in research and/or policy analysis. But by 1970 only 1,000 doctorates in social work had been awarded; again, an insufficient number for leadership in establishing policies.

Although the decade of the 1970s saw growth in social work education and its expansion to three educational levels (adding the Baccalaureate in Social Work [BSW] to the MSW and Ph.D. levels) this expansion did not occur early enough, or in sufficient scope, to create an impact on these public sector services. The initiation of BSW accredited programs in 1974 began the step to further differentiation of skills, but the total BSW labor force by the end of this decade was still inadequate to serve the social service labor force. While new doctoral programs begun during the 1970s produced another 1,000 graduates, most were employed by the expanding social work education programs.

The membership of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) grew approximately 35% during the 1970s. Although this increase was dramatic, the total NASW membership was still under 75,000 by the late 1970s. Fewer than half of these professional social workers (37,000) were reported to be in the public sector. Therefore, despite this growth in the production of BSW and MSW social workers, they represented less than one quarter of the nation's social service labor force at the beginning of the Reagan era (Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States, 1979; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1979). Additionally, the activism of the 1960s and the accountability focus of the 1970s occurred outside the boundaries of professional roles. Although community organization as a legitimated social work method began in the 1960s, many nonsocial workers were active and became organizers Further, the management focus of the 1970s caused many employers to look to other degrees to provide the technical expertise in budgeting, program evaluation, personnel management, and management information systems.

Thus the organizing and local initiatives required by the Economic Opportunity Act and the Community Mental Health Centers Act did not lure many professional social workers into either direct service or policy making positions. The managerial expertise required by the Title XX granting mechanisms appeared more compatible with the skills and values of graduates from masters degrees in business administration (MBA), public administration (MPA), and health administration (MHA) programs.

Another reason for social work's absence from the public sector was its focus on improving its professional stature. As a consequence, it turned its attention to issues of legal regulation of social work practice, labor force differentiation, and scientific research. The 1970s, more than any previous time, was a decade of the profession's internal reassessment, reorganization, and reprioritization. NASW created a new structure with state chapters, established a national Political Action for Candidate Endorsement (PACE) committee and an Education Legislation Action Network (ELAN), and drafted model legal regulation bills. Although PACE and ELAN were advocacy focused, they were in too early a developmental stage at the beginning of the Reagan era to be of significant utility.

A final reason is that the education of the vast majority of the professional social work labor force historically and at the beginning of this decade was directed at individual solutions and therapeutic interventions. Consequently, the fit between the new public social services labor force needs and the professional social worker's training was not compatible (Reeser & Epstein, 1991, p. 12).

Therefore, as the 1970s drew to a close, it was evident that: (a) the public support of services had expanded; (b) public social services had not replaced the traditional not-for-profit services; (c) professional social workers were still employed predominantly in the historic and traditional fields of practice such as not-for-profit family and children's services, mental health services, and hospital-based services and (d) social activism had diminished in social work, as it had throughout the nation, since the 1960s.

Thus, the authors contend that professional social workers historically were never a significant portion of the public sector, and were therefore not a large part of the huge federal/state bureaucracies created in the decades preceding the Reagan administration. This is not to diminish the important public policy roles of professional social workers such as Jeannette Rankin, Harry Hopkins, Jane Addams, and Wilbur Cohen, but to emphasize that there were not large numbers of professional social workers in the public sector to be displaced by Reagan's policies.

The Reagan Agenda: The Charity Model

The central thrust of the Reagan presidential agenda was to return to the former model of social services as charity delivered to the worthy poor by well-meaning volunteers. Since the enormity of the federal deficit had to be acknowledged and reduced, President Reagan chose to slash domestic social services, and espoused it as the return of decision-making to local units of government.

The blame for the deficit, rather than being focused on the escalating military expenditures, was placed on the increased public social service costs. Given no visible reduction in poverty, the blame was once again laid at the feet of the profession and the social welfare structure which had been incrementally established over decades, And once again the policies of welfare reform focused on reform of these antiquated systems rather than on the larger and real problems of illiteracy, high school dropouts, teen pregnancies, and unemployment.

Continuously the rhetoric in the early 1980s was the safety net for the worthy poor. However, the passage of the Gramm-Rudman Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985 signalled that indeed these deficit reductions would only be achieved through benefit cuts and other reductions in virtually every low-income entitlement program. The Federal argument was that there would not be cuts in essential programs for the truly needy because state and local governments and philanthropic associations would replace the lost federal dollars. The further argument was that waste and fraud would be reduced.

One extremely detrimental effect on the profession which began in the 1970s and continued during the 1980s was declassification of social service positions. Arguments were that professionally educated social workers were not interested in public social services; that on-the-job training was sufficient; and that employees who were professionally educated were overqualified. Thus, by reducing educational qualifications, salaries could be reduced (NASW, 1981).

To provide empirical supports for this argument, bench mark task analyses were conducted and the public social service labor force was asked to describe what tasks it performed. The

tautology of this research design — given that this preponderance of this labor force was neither professionally educated nor trained and thus would describe tasks and skills that did not require professional training — was either lost on bureaucratic administrators or provided the desired assessment regardless of the flawed methodology.

Therefore, even in the more advanced states where enlightened administrators understood that qualified, professional staff might be part of the long-range solution, particularly in the reduction of recidivism, these research outcomes and the demand to cut budgets forced declassification to become an acceptable solution. Consequently, at what might have been a pivotal point in the movement of professional social workers into the public sector in large enough numbers and high enough places to make a difference, budget reductions and declassification activities occurred.

Thus professional social workers had to develop arguments and research in a reactive posture to attempt to protect against any further declassification efforts. Unfortunately, part of this debate included the opposition's argument that if these positions were not declassified (or conversely, if positions were reclassified to account for the need for professionally educated social workers), there would be insufficient numbers of professionally trained social workers to fill these positions.

While these reductions were not directed to the not-for-profit sector, the trickle-down effect reduced the number of people eligible for public services and the number and diversity of public social services, thereby increasing the demand on the not-for-profit sector, Although the planned Reagan agenda was to return to the private philanthropic model, the ability of the private sector to move in and replace these cuts in federal expenditures was greatly diminished by the recession and the emergence of new social problems. As a consequence, the biggest demand on the profession was to address the ever increasing needs for all services with reduced budgets.

Although differentially impacted, many private not-for-profit social services suffered reduced or stagnant budgets because the private mechanisms of the United Way campaigns,

annual donor drives, private foundations, and public demonstration and training grants were also affected by the recession. Most not-for-profits were hit with higher caseloads shifted from the public sector or due to new problems emerging. Consequently, many of these not-for-profit agencies experienced reductions in funding and increases in caseloads as did the public sector (Gibelman & Demone, 1990; Demone & Gibelman, 1984; Iatridis, 1988).

Unfortunately, the profession entered the 1980s without sufficient interest or expertise in political activity, neither entrenched in the public sector nor immersed in advocacy. As earlier noted, this was partly due to the management and accountability era of the 1970s; partly because political activity has always been somewhat suspect in professional social work circles; and partly due to our acceptance of the privatization model.

The New Right: Instituting the Charity Model

The profession of social work in the early 1980s found itself in the age-old dilemma of either being agents of social control or agents of social change and chose the former role. In order to cope with these reductions in funds and increases in service demands, not-for-profit agencies decided not to turn clients away or turn them against the government, which would have represented a social change model. Instead they utilized social control solutions that didn't increase service delivery budgets. Approaches such as higher caseloads, increased use of volunteers, consumers as deliverers of service, and increased fees for services were employed. In some instances, agencies have been able to compensate for federal reductions but have not increased revenues sufficient to cover the increased caseloads (Gibelman & Demone, 1990).

There are several explanations for the acceptance of a social control model and the utilization of privatization as a solution. First was the emergence of the New Right, which Reagan capitalized on and which represented a combination of economic libertarianism and social traditionalism, This paradoxical combination invoked different themes. The New Right spoke of

"freedom and individualism on economic matters, restraint and community on social matters, and total mobilization on national security matters" (Himmelstein, 1983, p. 17).

Given that these issues emerged with such force and had linkages in American culture, there was something for everyone to grab on to, even though one might not agree with the total package. For example, how could anyone disagree about the importance of the family? However, a simple position statement such as "keeping the family together" did not convey the total philosophy of this new American conservatism because the statement really meant that women should stay home. The subtle effectiveness of this strategy is evident when one realizes that to speak out against this message was then interpreted as an "against the family" statement. Reagan and the New Right artfully employed phrases which utilized a positive "pro" terminology and forced liberals and social workers to be labelled "anti": antifamily; antichoice.

Reagan and the New Right had as their enemy liberals who operated through the federal government. As previously noted, social workers were not employed in great numbers by the federal government but they did use these programs to assist their clients. Consequently, social workers were included on the enemy list. To combat this attack or to differentiate themselves from the untrained public employees, new labels were used to describe professional social workers clinical social worker, therapist, family or marriage counselor, manager.

Although it seems inconsistent with our professional history to adopt threads of the New Right philosophy, not only was it adopted, but it appears to have become quite imbedded in our practices. For example, with the renewed emergence of the issues of hunger and homelessness, social workers and the private sector were quick to mount food drives and create temporary shelters rather than to mount large-scale campaigns to expand AFDC benefits, food stamp eligibility, and public housing. As people began to beg in the streets, previously an uncommon sight in many parts of the country, the public became uncomfortable. Social workers responded with approaches such as meal tickets which the public could purchase and give to the beggars to use in the agency's soup kitchen. Such a response

was cited as a creative approach to addressing the needs of the new street people as well as to developing revenue for the agency. What this creative approach did was to accept begging rather than question hunger in this wealthy nation. It was creative in relieving the public's guilt.

The expanding problems related to the increase in AIDS or domestic violence resulted in similar creative mechanisms such as the increased use of self-help groups and reliance on volunteers for hospices and shelters, rather than to demand more professionals, increased funding for research on effective methodologies, or funding for preventive strategies.

Also, these creative solutions helped to set the profession behind other professions. For example, an additional creative response was to schedule time for essential training or planning activities through the use of staff's personal time. Administrators who argued that they could not spare social workers from direct service delivery because of the high caseloads suggested that these on-the-job training or long-range planning activities could be conducted after hours and on Saturday with no additional remuneration. Such approaches perpetuated the myth that social workers must be dedicated and altruistic and accept long hours, low pay, and negative public images, while other professionals, such as medical doctors, nurses, and lawyers, demanded and received better salaries and greater resources to accomplish their duties, particularly when their caseloads increased.

Traditional social service agencies were quick to call these solutions creative and proactive. Professional social workers began to defend, if not promote, them in professional circles as acceptable solutions. While it is clear that these ideas may be acceptable Band-aids, they cannot be conceived of as part of the long-term structural solution.

It has been argued by many, including the authors, that once again the profession accepted society's definition of the problem, which included the social work profession as part of the problem. The profession was labelled either as overly educated, liberal dogooders, or unscientific bleeding hearts.

Another reason that the profession accepted the social control model is the public's acceptance of Reagan's attitude toward

the disadvantaged. Unfortunately, the great communicator was successful not only in changing the public's attitude but the social work profession's as well (Reeser & Epstein, 1990, p. 14).

Shortly into the decade there was a change in attitude toward the unemployed. President Reagan was seen holding up the want ad page and saying that with all these jobs, anyone can work. While this may have been ludicrous for those who are knowledgeable about labor force supply and demand, it nonetheless left in the mind of the public a nagging thought that the unemployed could work if they wanted to. Similar rhetoric toward civil rights, poverty, and women's roles led to a resurgence and acceptance of previous stereotypical attitudes.

The community felt strongly that canned food donated to the poor was an acceptable method of feeding the hungry in this country. The public could feel charitable and helpful and again, the profession was placed in a position of being seen as anti-charity. Thus, professional social workers got behind these movements and convinced themselves that these were stopgap until such time as structural and institutional solutions could be reinitiated. The concern is that such a philosophy seems to have become well imbedded and mainstreamed.

For example, during the Reagan era, homelessness became a major national issue. The response to this new social problem was to provide programs such as daycare service for homeless children, special classes, meals, or mail delivery. The supply of public, low-income housing did not increase and consequently the country has now institutionalized homelessness.

Given this strong movement and the fact that the social work profession was caught short of social workers trained in or even interested in advocacy, either as a professional career choice or at least as an adjunct to clinical practice (Haynes & Mickelson 1991, p.xvi), and given that they did not exist in the public sector in large numbers, it is understandable that the profession accepted the social control model. Although it would seem logical that social workers would have been the professional group to defend and support human service programs, such support was almost nonexistent.

Therefore, instead of mounting proactive campaigns, the profession's position was of reacting to these cutbacks and

counting success by holding off further reductions. Thus social work strategies that were consistent with the privatization model, which had same bases in the New Right, were utilized.

The Reagan era found social workers using seemingly creative mechanisms to fill the holes in the safety net and trying to explain how this creativity did not diffuse professionalism in responding to human need — a professionalism that had taken 100 years to construct.

In Response to Reagan; Advocacy

While undoubtedly the Reagan era had a devastating effect on public social services and created new obstacles to professional social workers who wanted to enter or move up in the public social services, it may have had a positive although certainly unintended effect on the profession.

Although it was slow in starting, a resurgence of advocacy began in the 1980s. In 1982 the Council on Social Work Education included in its curriculum policy statement that students should be prepared "to exert leadership and influence as legislative and social advocates, lobbyists, and expert advisors to policy makers and administrators" . . . in ways that "will further the achievement of social work goals and purposes." The inclusion in curriculum is still uneven, as school bulletins, catalogue descriptions, and CSWE self-study submissions reveal.

Increased interest in social work education particularly during the latter half of the 1980s is well documented through the enrollment and application data (CSWE, 1979; 1985; 1990). Further, the managerial and bureaucratic language of the 1970s is being replaced in the classroom with the language of advocacy. In a 1989 survey, 42 of 100 graduate schools had courses on community organization, advocacy, and/or planned change (Cornman, 1989). In fact, one graduate program has established a specialization in political social work; another in social justice (Reeser & Leighninger, 1990).

Further evidence of this change is an increase in professional articles and textbooks addressing issues of advocacy. Some of these works are about political skills; Burghardt's *The Other Side of Organizing;* Fisher's *Let the People Decide; Neighborhood Organizing in America;* Haynes and Mickelson's *Affecting Change: Social*

Workers in the Political Arena; and Mahaffey and Hanks' *Practical Politics: Social Work and Political Responsibility* (Burghardt, 1982; Fisher, 1984; Haynes and Mickelson, 1986; and Mahaffey and Hanks, 1982). Others were about organizing and other advocacy roles to influence policy makers. still others found increases in the political awareness and advocacy of social workers in the late 1980s (Ezell, 1989; Reeser and Epstein, 1990).

The reduction of governmental supports coupled with the recession brought many social problems closer to home and made them more publicly visible. Additionally, unanticipated consequences of the new philanthropy, which promoted the use of affluent volunteers and consumers as service deliverers, were to broaden the base of support for services; to increase the understanding of human suffering; to enlighten more people about the cause of that suffering; and to value the need for professional, systematic, and institutionalized responses to that suffering.

The increased development of coalitions composed of an assortment of sometimes disparate groups were constructed to combat further reductions. Generations United is a good example of an effort to address the Reagan administration's question, "Where do we cut — children or senior citizens?" This divisive effort by the administration, although not entirely eliminated by such coalitions, was confronted. An additional by-product of these coalitions was that other professional and volunteer groups became more educated about and more supportive of professional social workers' roles and skills and of the need to form coalitions for increased advocacy.

Another example of this increased advocacy by both volunteers and social workers can be seen in support of one group of the population that was especially hard hit by the Reagan era (Phillips, p. 206). Children took the brunt of the Reagan administration's cuts (Kids Count, 1991). From this despair sprang a renewed form of child advocacy different from previous advocacy efforts.

In 1984 the Association of Child Advocates was established with 14 member organizations which grew to over 50 by the time Reagan left office and to 90 by the end of the decade. The Children's Defense Fund increased its staff and budget and

the Child Welfare League of America took a new and stronger role in advocacy. These efforts encouraged the profession to continue on this steady course of increased advocacy, not only in children's issues, but across the human service continuum as well.

With the increased pressure on the not-for-profit human service organizations, executive directors increased their political activities to advocate for clients to receive governmental social services. Although directors faced conflicting expectations and demands from different constituencies about political activities, research indicates that they were engaged in a variety of advocacy activities on and off the job (Pawlak and Flynn, 1991).

Social workers learned advocacy techniques from the Reagan administration as well. Advocates who had always struggled with the question of where the additional money was going to come from found the answer in Secretary of Defense Weinberger. His response to such a question when he proposed a tremendous increase in the defense budget: "That's not my problem. I'm here to tell you what needs to be done."

Also during this era there was a change in the number of social workers elected to political office. On local levels there was a greater effort to elect social workers to city council seats, county commissioner positions, and mayoral posts. MSW social workers became mayors of major cities and state legislators. Additionally, not only was one more social worker elected to Congress, but the first social worker in history was seated in the United States Senate, thereby establishing excellent role models of political advocates for others to follow.

In the early 1980s, social worker/politicians were reluctant to identify themselves with the profession because of public and professional pressure. As more support came from the profession, these social worker/politicians became mare public about their professional identity (Haynes & Mickelson, 1991, p. 146). The profession's support for political activity can also be measured in the growth of NASW's political action committee, PACE. From 1982 to 1988 annual contributions almost doubled. PACE also encouraged and supported student placements and created a paid political scholarship.

These activities may suggest that the profession has made significant strides in its advocacy efforts, However, it must be remembered that this resurgence in advocacy has occurred because of the devastation to social services and to clients. It is important to continue this trend, given the dark ages of the Reagan era.

Conclusion

The Reagan era had some detrimental effects on the profession, although these were neither as devastating nor as permanent as an uninformed or superficial examination might suggest. It is evident that the Reagan era did slow same gains which might have resulted in the profession's assumption of a greater leadership role in the public sector during the 1980s.

The profession found itself opposing Reagan's ideology, but nonetheless adopting the methodologies of the charity model. However, this conflict and the continued assault on clients gave rise to the seeds of advocacy. It had become self-evident that complacency and absence from the political and legislative arenas left the profession and our clients vulnerable to any ideological shift, Therefore, resurgence of advocacy in the profession, if nurtured and sustained, will serve as some protection to the profession and its clientele from capricious extremism in the future.

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Volume XVI, Number 4, December, 1989

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(Revised December, 1987)

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Style. Overall style should conform to that found in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, Third Edition, 1983. Use in-text citations (Reich, 1983), (Reich, 1983, p.5). The use of footnotes in the text is discouraged. If footnotes are essential, include them on a separate sheet after the last page of the references. The use of italics or quotation marks for emphasis is discouraged. Words should be underlined only when it is intended that they be typeset in italics.

Gender and Disability Stereotypes. We encourage authors to avoid gender restricting phrasing and unnecessary masculine pronouns. Use of plural pronouns and truly generic nouns ("labor force" instead of "manpower") will usually solve the problem without extra space or awkwardness. When dealing with disabilities, avoid making people synonymous with the disability they have ("employees with visual impairments" rather than "the blind"). Don't magnify the disabling condition ("wheelchair user" rather than "confined to a wheelchair"). For further suggestions see the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* or *Guide to Non-Sexist Language and Visuals*, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Processing Fee. The increased cost of typesetting has made it necessary to charge a processing fee of $35 to authors who are accepted for publication. You will be billed at the time of acceptance.

BOOK REVIEWS

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