



PUBLIC POLICY

COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

CSWE Members Meet with Key Federal Policymakers in Support of Social Work Education

March 26, 2009

As part of the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) ongoing Public Policy Initiative, in late March CSWE members and leaders participated in meetings with key policymakers in Washington, DC to promote the value of social work education and offer CSWE as a resource to federal decision makers at this very important time. Members were formed into four thematic teams: Education, Children and Families, Veterans Affairs, and Indian Health*. In most cases, the groups met with the federal agency that is responsible for their issue as well as the Congressional committee(s) that have oversight jurisdiction for that agency. By visiting the federal agency and the corresponding Congressional committees, each group was able to get a sense of how their issue is being addressed across the federal government by the different parties involved.

Below are highlights from each of the group's meetings. Tremendous connections were made throughout the federal government thanks to these efforts. CSWE will be following up on the many action items that came out of these meetings. Going forward, it will be critical to the success of CSWE's public policy objectives for members to become active and stay involved in activities such as this.

Education

Kay Hoffman, University of Kentucky College of Social Work, Mark Rodgers, Dominican University Graduate School of Social Work, and Alberto Godenzi, Boston College Graduate School of Social Work and President of the National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD), met with officials at the Department of Education and the House Education and Labor Committee. First, the team met with Bob Shireman, Special Advisor to the Secretary for Higher Education at the Department of Education. The group raised several issues with Bob, including support for the new Promise Neighborhoods program proposed by President Obama, which would encourage the establishment and linkage of support services for children and families in depressed areas. The group also discussed the need to include social work as an area of national need within the Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN) program, which provides funds to institutions of higher education for fellowships to graduate students in specific areas.

Bob encouraged CSWE to look at the two new loan forgiveness programs that were authorized in the 2007 *College Cost Reduction and Access Act* (P.L. 110-84)—the income based repayment (IBR) program for student loans and loan forgiveness for public service. He believed both of these programs, which will be funded out of mandatory funding, would be more useful to social work students and professionals than the loan forgiveness programs for specific professions included in the *Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA)*, which will need to be funded through the appropriations process.

IBR will begin operation in July 2009. The new program caps federal student loan payments at a reasonable percentage of income (required payment will be \$0 for borrowers with incomes at or below 150% of the poverty level) and cancels most remaining balances of student loans after 25 years.

* It is important to note that while each group was responsible for discussing a different topic or target population, there is a great amount of synergy among these topics and populations. The information gathered by one group will no doubt be of interest to the other groups. None of these issues are being addressed in isolation.

The Public Service Loan Forgiveness program will forgive remaining federal student loan debt after ten years to eligible employment and qualifying loan payments. Eligible borrowers must be employed by any nonprofit, tax exempt 501(c)3; the federal, state, or local government (including the military); or serve full time in AmeriCorps or the Peace Corps. Payments must be made after October 2007 on federal student loans in order to qualify and they must be made while the borrower is working full time in an eligible job. The 10 years of payments and service do not have to be consecutive.

Because the Department of Education is beginning to operate both of these programs this year, the Department is interested in receiving feedback from the community regarding how they are working. He also encouraged CSWE to spread the word about these programs and work with the Department to educate students going into public services about these programs. He was interested in learning if these programs will be useful to keeping students in public service and in the social work profession.

Next, the group met with staff on the House Education and Labor Committee, which has jurisdiction over the Department of Education and educational policy. Staff stated that the Committee is not sure what the higher education agenda might look like in the 111th Congress since *the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA)* was enacted last year. The Committee is currently wrapping up its work on the *GIVE Act (HR 1388)* and completing technical amendments for HEOA. The Committee is very interested in hearing about the success and issues with IBR when it starts in July 2009 and encouraged the group to communicate with the Committee with any feedback on the program. Because Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA) is interested in accountability, the team discussed CSWE's efforts regarding student competency and accountability standards. CSWE offered to be a resource for the committee as they examine issues of accountability and student competency standards.

Children and Families

CSWE President Ira Colby, University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, CSWE Executive Director Julia Watkins, and NADD President Alberto Godenzi participated in two meetings on Capitol Hill to discuss the role of social workers and social work education in the area of children and families. First, the group participated in a meeting with staff from the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health, which has jurisdiction over the agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) including the Administration for Children and Families. The Energy and Commerce Committee is focusing much of its attention on health care reform and has been holding a number of informative hearings to set the stage for broad national reform. The committee plans to start crafting their legislation after they have completed their informational hearings. The purpose of these hearings is to provide the committee with information from the public on the gaps in health care and the needs for reform. CSWE was invited to provide information to the committee on what it sees as needs for health care reform. CSWE plans to provide information to the committee. In addition, the team discussed loan forgiveness as incentives to keep social workers in underserved communities and the larger issue of access and health disparities, support for direct caregivers, and curriculum development.

Next, the group met with staff from the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Children and Families, which is the Senate counterpart to the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Staff was interested in learning more about CSWE and its interests with regard to legislation dealing with children and families. The group explained that Title VI E (grants to states for child welfare services) is typically the legislation that is most relevant to social work as it provides training funds for the child welfare workforce. The Senate Committee is hoping to move two pieces of legislation this year key to children and families: reauthorization of the *Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)* and the *Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA)*. They hope both bills will move in the next couple of weeks, but welcome comments from CSWE to enhance the bills. Staff encouraged CSWE to stay engaged with the committee going forward.

Veterans Affairs

CSWE President Ira Colby was joined by members of the CSWE Veterans Taskforce, Jesse Harris, University of Maryland School of Social Work, and Norma (Cindy) Jones, Norfolk State University School of Social Work, for meetings with the Department of Veterans Affairs and staff for a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. First, the group met with staff in the Office of Congressman Ciro Rodriguez

(D-TX/23). Congressman Rodriguez, who is a social worker and a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, has been working with CSWE's government relations staff over the last several months on legislation that would authorize incentive programs to enhance the number of social workers in the VA. Specifically, staff is interested in reviving a VA scholarship program that sunset over a decade ago. They will be working with CSWE to ensure that should this program be reinstated, it is done so in a way that will be most valuable to social workers. The group also discussed the importance of including a rural health component in the bill to address the issue of access to VA services and the possibility of using loan forgiveness tied to a service requirement to recruit social workers to serve in rural areas. The Veterans Taskforce recently completed a report analyzing the role of social work education in meeting the needs of the veteran population. The group offered to share the final report with Congressman Rodriguez's staff once released.

Next the group met with officials in the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Consultant Care Management and Social Work within Patient Care Services and the Associated Health Education Office within VA Academic Affiliations. The purpose of this meeting was to explore ways in which CSWE and schools of social work can be helpful to the VA as they train and prepare social workers for practice in VA facilities. The VA officials explained their primary role as providing the clinical components of readjustment, such as helping veterans cope with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other conditions. They are also focused on the adjustment needs of families and caregivers of returning war veterans. According to the VA, 7,000 social workers are currently serving in the VA system and that number is expected to grow as more veterans return from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. The VA is the largest trainer of social workers and is affiliated with about 100 universities nationwide.

According to the Office of Consultant Care Management and Social Work, the area of caregiver support has received a lot of attention in recent years, both within the VA and in the Congress. For example, the VA is currently funding a caregiver assistance pilot program, which is focused on expanding and improving health care education and resources for caregivers who assist disabled and aging veterans in their homes. The pilot is currently being conducted in 8 states across the country. In addition, a number of legislative proposals are coming out of Congress dealing with full time direct family caregiver assistance. The VA expects this will be a growing area in the future.

The Office of Academic Affiliations oversees all education activities at the VA. They support about 100,000 trainees, half of which are medical and the other half "associated health" disciplines including social work (about 50 percent of VA social workers come out of VA training programs). VA currently provides \$80 million each year in trainee stipends. They are exploring the possibility of developing a strategic plan to look at the needs and gaps in associated health programs and are hoping to increase funding for these programs over the next several years.

Indian Health

CSWE Board member Jon Kei Matsuoka, University of Hawaii School of Social Work, and members of the CSWE Native American Task Force, Priscilla Day, University of Minnesota Duluth Department of Social Work, and Suzanne Cross (joined by a student), Michigan State University School of Social Work, met with staff on the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs as well as officials at the Indian Health Service (IHS) within the Department of Health and Human Services. The staffer for the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs was appreciative that CSWE came to meet with her, particularly because her boss, Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND), Chairman of the Committee, is very interested in Native American issues. She said that Chairman Dorgan is committed to reauthorizing the *Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA)*. The IHCIA is the primary law that governs the current healthcare system for American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN). Indian groups have been working for years to see the law—which has not been reauthorized since 1992—revised to provide a more modern framework for Indian healthcare. Last year, many were hopeful when the Senate approved a bill for reauthorization, but the House did not pass a companion bill. Staff indicated that Chairman Dorgan believes it is very important to pass the IHCIA legislation before Congress takes up health care reform. CSWE was encouraged to provide comments and/or feedback on the bill.

The Senate staffer also said that Chairman Dorgan believes there is a need for better mental health service programs, such as suicide prevention programs on Indian reservations, and suggested that social workers should play an important role. Senator Dorgan is very interested in “telemental health,” which is similar to “telemedicine” but includes the mental health side of the equation, and pointed out that social workers could be the bridge between physicians and patients on Indian reservations. Additionally, staff encouraged CSWE to work with the Boys & Girls Club for Indian Country on their efforts to get a line-item included in the annual appropriations bill as this would be beneficial to social workers as well, specifically with regard to prevention methods.

Next, the group met with the Division of Behavioral Health and the Division of Health Professions Support at the Indian Health Service (IHS), who stated that it is extremely important for CSWE to take an active interest in recruiting Native American social workers. They suggested CSWE re-energize its recruitment efforts and help mentor young folks to choose this area of work. They mentioned that the IHS Director-Nominee, Dr. Yvette Roubideaux from the University of Arizona, received her medical degree courtesy of an IHS program.

The Health Professions Support staff provided participants with a document describing IHS’s scholarship, loan repayment, recruitment, and retention programs, which are programs used to provide support for American Indian and Alaska Native students and others to provide health care services to Indian communities. They informed us that approximately 50 percent of loan repayment recipients are Native Americans, and that the National Service Corporation received money in the economic stimulus bill for loan repayment programs. In addition, they reported that the Preparatory and Pre-Graduate Scholarship program funded by IHS is only for Native Americans. The program’s budget has been flat for many years (with an exception of last year when it received a small increase), and that only about 100 out of 1200 applicants were funded. Many more people are accepted to the largest of the IHS loan programs, the Loan Repayment Program, which is available to anyone graduating from health professional schools at a qualified site.

CSWE was encouraged to take a leadership role in the “Friends of Indian Health” coalition to help develop working relationships with tribal communities and Congress. In addition, it was suggested that we arrange periodic webinars between IHS staff and CSWE members to keep in touch and share information.