



COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

STRENGTHENING THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORK

Leadership in Research, Career Advancement, and Education

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May 02, 2012

The Honorable Harry Reid
United States Senator
Hart Senate Office Building, SH-522
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Reid,

On behalf of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), I write to applaud your commitment to postponing the scheduled July 1, 2012 interest rate increase for subsidized federal student loans. Because of the importance of this issue to social work students across the country, CSWE encourages your leadership towards finding an achievable bi-partisan resolution to this important issue.

As you may know, CSWE (www.CSWE.org) is a nonprofit national association representing more than 2,500 individual members, as well as over 650 graduate and undergraduate programs of professional social work education. Founded in 1952, this partnership of educational and professional institutions, social welfare agencies, and private citizens is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation as the sole accrediting agency for social work education in the United States.

Student assistance programs and policies are a particularly important issue for healthcare professionals, such as social workers, who complete years of schooling in order to serve the public good. With an aging population and more people generally seeking health care services, the need for additional social workers is increasing. For example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that employment for social workers is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2020, particularly for healthcare social workers and mental health and substance abuse social workers, which are projected to increase by 34 and 31 percent, respectively, over the decade of 2010 through 2020ⁱ.

Unfortunately, recruitment into the social work profession faces many obstacles, the most prevalent being low wages coupled with high educational debt. Many are unaware that the median annual wage for child, family, and school social workers in May 2010 was \$40,210, and the median wage for mental health and substance abuse social workers was \$38,600ⁱⁱ. In addition, while a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW) is necessary for most entry-level social work positions, a master's degree (MSW) is the terminal degree for clinical social work practice. This significantly contributes to the debt load of social work graduates entering careers with notoriously low starting wages.

According to the *2010 Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States*, the annual survey conducted by CSWE, approximately 79.7 percent of baccalaureate graduates complete their programs with a median debt of \$23,982. Compare that to master's level social workers for which 80.2 percent hold a median educational debt of \$32,198ⁱⁱⁱ.

These difficult realities have made recruitment and retention of social workers an ongoing challenge and

have deterred many students from pursuing social work careers at a time where increased numbers of professionals are needed more than ever.

Thank you again for your support and dedication to student assistance programs and policies that will encourage the much needed next generation of social workers. If I can provide any additional information that would be helpful to you or your staff, please do not hesitate to contact me or CSWE Government Relations at Carla@lewis-burke.com or 202-289-7475.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julia M. Watkins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Julia M. Watkins, Ph.D., Executive Director
Council on Social Work Education

ⁱ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2012-13 Edition*, Social Workers, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm> (visited April 24, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Council on Social Work Education. (2011). *2010 Statistics of Social Work Education in the United States: A Summary*, on the Internet at <http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=52269> (visited April 24, 2012).