



**Testimony for Fiscal Year 2011 regarding the
Departments of Education and Health and Human Services**

Submitted to the Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
April 12, 2010

On behalf of the Council on Social Work Education, I am pleased to offer this written testimony to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies for inclusion in the official Committee record. I will focus my testimony on the importance of fostering a skilled, sustainable, and diverse social work workforce through professional education, training and financial support programs at the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is a nonprofit national association representing more than 3,000 individual members as well as 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 (CHEA) as the sole accrediting agency for social work education in the United States. Social work education focuses students on leadership and direct practice roles helping individuals, families, groups, and communities by creating new opportunities that empower people to be productive, contributing members of their communities.

The ability to recruit and retain social workers poses a significant challenge to the success of the profession and ultimately our ability to serve vulnerable populations. This is true across all sectors (public and private), at all levels (from bachelor's to the doctoral level), and in all fields of practice (child welfare, public health, mental health, geriatrics, veterans, etc.).

The nation requires a social work workforce that is skilled, diverse, and able to keep pace with demand. However, 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 2018, particularly for social workers specializing in the aging population and working in rural areas. In addition, mental health and substance abuse social workers are expected to grow by almost 20 percent over the 2008-2018 decade, with social workers specializing in substance abuse experiencing strong demand as people are increasingly placed in treatment programs instead of prison systems. Further, "[the] growing elderly population and the aging baby boom generation will create greater demand for health and social services, resulting in rapid job growth among gerontological social workers."¹

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition: Social Workers, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/print.pl/oco/ocos060.htm> (March 2010).

While recruitment and retention can be a significant challenge for many professions, especially those dealing with public health and the delivery of social services, the problem is exceptionally widespread for social work. Recruitment into the social work profession faces many obstacles, the most prevalent being low wages coupled with high educational debt. For example, the median annual wage for child, family, and school social workers in May 2008 was \$39,530, while the wage for mental health and substance abuse social workers was \$37,210. Further, while a bachelor's degree (BSW) is necessary for most entry-level positions, a master's degree (MSW) is the terminal degree for social work practice, which significantly contributes to the debt load of social work graduates entering careers with low starting wages. According to the 2007-2008 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education, 72 percent of students graduating from MSW programs incurred debt to earn their graduate degree. The average debt was approximately \$35,500. The percentage of MSW students borrowing money is 17 percent higher than the average for all master's degrees and the amount borrowed is approximately \$5,000 higher than the average for all master's degrees. These difficult realities have made recruitment and retention of social workers an ongoing challenge.

The below recommendations for Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 would help to ensure that we are fostering a sustainable, skilled, and diverse workforce that will be able to keep up with the increasing demand for social work services.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

The agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provide professional education, training, fellowship, and loan repayment opportunities to help recruit and retain social workers in the profession. CSWE urges the Committee's support for the following HHS programs:

Minority Fellowship Program, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

Administration (SAMHSA) – The goal of the SAMHSA Minority Fellowship Program (MFP) is to achieve greater numbers of minority doctoral students preparing for leadership roles in the mental health and substance abuse field. According to SAMHSA, "Minorities make up approximately one fourth of the population, but only about 10 percent of mental health providers are ethnic minorities." CSWE has been a grantee of this critical program for years, administering funds to exceptional minority social work students. Together with a program at the National Institute of Mental Health (see below for more information), CSWE has supported over 500 minority fellows since the program's inception, with about two-thirds of those students having gone on to receive their doctoral degrees. ***For FY 2011, CSWE urges the Committee to appropriate \$7.5 million to the SAMHSA Minority Fellowship Program.*** This would include \$6.882 million for the Center for Mental Health Services, where the majority of MFP funds are administered; \$71,000 for the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention; and \$547,000 for the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.

The program has helped support doctoral-level professional education for over 1,000 ethnic minority social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, and family and marriage counselors since its inception. Still, the program continues to struggle to keep up with the

demands that are plaguing our health professions. Severe shortages of mental health professionals often arise in underserved areas due to the difficulty of recruitment and retention in the public sector. Nowhere are these shortages more prevalent than in Indian Country, where mental illness and substance abuse go largely untreated and incidences of suicide continue to increase. Studies have shown that ethnic minority mental health professionals practice in underserved areas at a higher rate than non-minorities. Furthermore, a direct positive relationship exists between the numbers of ethnic minority mental health professionals and the utilization of needed services by ethnic minorities.

The \$7.5 million request would be used to substantially increase access to professional education and training for additional minority mental health and substance abuse professionals, in turn helping to ensure that underserved minority populations receive the mental health and substance abuse services they so desperately need. President Obama's FY 2011 budget request includes flat funding for the MFP at about \$4.9 million. Funding the MFP at \$7.5 million would directly encourage more social workers of minority backgrounds to pursue doctoral degrees in mental health and substance abuse and will turnout more minority mental health professionals equipped to provide culturally competent, accessible mental health and substance abuse services to diverse populations.

Institutional Research Training Program in Social Work (T32), National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) – The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) within the National Institutes of Health (NIH) initiated a training program in the 1970s that sought to increase the number of minority doctoral students focusing their research in mental health. Like the SAMHSA program mentioned above, CSWE has ably administered a grant from NIMH for many years, which provides mentored training opportunities to minority social work researchers. The social work profession depends on culturally-competent and culturally-relevant research to assess the circumstances facing vulnerable populations and the needs of those populations to succeed in their circumstances, evaluate the accessibility to and effectiveness of existing social services, and determine best practices for social work educators and practitioners for serving the community. While this program has been successful in enhancing diversity among social workers conducting mental health research and has allowed more underrepresented social work researchers to be brought into the fold as NIH investigators, NIMH recently announced its plan to cancel the program in 2010 and transition the funds to support the traditional, non-diversity-focused T32 training program at NIMH. CSWE is very concerned about the implications of this decision, both on the diversity of researchers at NIMH and what we feel could lead to an absence of social work research at NIMH. *We urge the Committee to encourage NIMH to take the necessary steps to enhance diversity of the NIH/NIMH grant pool and express to NIMH the value and importance of social work research to the study of mental health.*

Title VII and VIII Health Professions Programs, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) – The Title VII and Title VIII (nursing) health professions programs at HRSA provide financial support for education and development of the health care workforce. The emphasis of these programs is on improving the quality, diversity, and geographic distribution of the health professions workforce, and is currently the only federal program to do so. These programs provide loans, loan guarantees and scholarships to students, and grants to institutions of higher education and non-profit organizations to help build and maintain a robust

health care workforce. Social work students and practitioners are eligible for Title VII funding. We thank the Committee for recognizing the value of these programs by providing an additional \$200 million for the Title VII and Title VIII programs in the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (P.L. 111-5). **CSWE urges the Committee to provide \$600 million for the Title VII and Title VIII health professions programs for FY 2011.**

In addition, the *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* (P.L. 111-148) recently authorized a number of new programs within Title VII. In particular, CSWE urges the Committee to provide first-time funding for the Mental and Behavioral Health Education and Training Grants program, which would provide grants to institutions of higher education (schools of social work and other mental health professions) for faculty and student recruitment and professional education and training. **The law authorizes \$8 million for training in social work for FY 2011. CSWE urges the Committee to appropriate the full amount.** As stated earlier, mental health and substance abuse social work is expected to grow by nearly 20 percent over the next decade. Programs like this will prove invaluable in encouraging more people to enter careers specializing in mental and behavioral health.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

CSWE urges the Committee to support the following programs at the Department of Education:

Loan Forgiveness for Service in Areas of National Need Program – The *Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008* (P.L. 110-315) created the Loan Forgiveness for Service in Areas of National Need program; however, the program has not yet been funded. CSWE applauds Congress for expanding the Income Based Repayment (IBR) program in the recently passed *Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act/Reconciliation Act of 2010* (P.L. 111-152), but urges Congress to fund the Loan Forgiveness for Service in Areas of National Need program, which unlike IBR would offer immediate relief for qualifying social workers. This program applies to full-time workers who are employed in areas of national need, such as social workers working in public or private child welfare agencies or mental health professionals with at least a master's degree in social work. **CSWE urges full funding for this program for FY 2011.**

American Graduation Initiative – While President Obama's American Graduation Initiative (AGI) was not ultimately funded in the *Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act/Reconciliation Act of 2010* (P.L. 111-152), CSWE urges the Committee to appropriate funding to begin this important initiative in FY 2011. The initiative seeks to produce 5 million additional community college graduates by 2020, create a Community College Challenge Fund to provide competitive grants for reform (including expansion of course offerings, dual enrollment at high schools and universities, and transfer of credit), fund innovative strategies to promote college completion, modernize community college facilities, and create a new online skills laboratory. For many professions that are in high demand and for which shortages exist, like social work, four-year degrees are required to enter the workforce. CSWE is interested in enhancing the relationships between schools of social work and two-year programs to provide a more seamless transition from community college to four-year social work programs as a way to help address shortages in the social work profession. **CSWE urges the Committee to invest in AGI in FY 2011.**