

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING CALIFORNIA'S  
SHORTAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

**Findings from a series of hearings convened by the  
California Assembly Human Services Committee**

**November 2002**

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## INTRODUCTION

The California Assembly Human Services Committee (referred to as "the Committee" from this point forward) has jurisdiction over several policy areas in the California State Legislature, including child welfare, child care, developmental disabilities, public assistance, and aging and senior services. Guided by the leadership and concern of its chairperson, Assemblywoman Dion Louise Aroner (D-Berkeley), the California Assembly Human Services Committee engaged in a number of activities over a two-year period designed to address the state's shortage of social workers. The Assembly Human Services Committee took particular interest in this workforce issue because it recognized the detrimental effects our state's social worker shortage has on the quality of services provided to the adults, children, and families served by our public human service agencies.

Over the past two years, Assemblywoman Aroner established an advisory group, convened legislative hearings, and introduced legislation to address the state's social worker shortage. The recommendations included in this report reflect the testimony and research findings submitted to the Committee as it convened activities on the state's social worker shortage. The recommendations in this report are intended to provide direction to the Governor of the state of California, the California Health and Human Services Agency, and its affiliated departments to take actions that will result in an increased supply of social workers to meet the state's demand. Following the recommendations section of this report is a description of information learned about the social worker shortage in California, including information about the size of the shortage in California and a brief description of the factors contributing to this workforce shortage.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are presented in two sections: 1) Recruitment strategies, designed to increase the pool of social workers in the state, and 2) Retention strategies, designed to maintain the current pool of social workers by improving their working conditions. There may be recommendations contained in one category which may seem to also address the other category. However, it is clear from the information gathered by the Committee that addressing the state's shortage of social work staff requires a comprehensive set of strategies to address deficits in both areas.

### Recruitment: Strategies to Expand the Pool of Social Workers in California

#### **1. Create and fund tuition reimbursement and loan forgiveness programs for social work students.**

Historically, California has utilized student financial assistance programs to encourage students to pursue high demand disciplines, such as teaching and nursing. *The state should create financial assistance programs to support students pursuing college degrees in social work.* Recent examples of programs in other disciplines include:

- AB 101 (Alquist, 2001, vetoed) would have created a scholarship program for college students, including social work students, pursuing degrees in gerontology.
- SB 632 (Perata, 2001, failed due to inaction) would have created a forgivable loan program for college students pursuing degrees in mental health, with special emphasis on current county employees who pursue such degrees.
- Cal Grants A, B, and T include financial assistance for college students attending teacher preparation programs.
- Governor's Teaching Fellowship provides \$20,000 grants to college students who make a commitment to teach in low-performing schools.
- AB 2528 (Jackson, 2002, failed due to inaction) would have established interest-free loans to nursing students.

#### **2. Support the expansion of the federal Title IV-E social work student stipend program.<sup>1</sup>**

Under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, students enrolled in social work masters degree (MSW) programs, specializing in public child welfare services, may receive two years of financial assistance (\$18,500 per year) in exchange for committing to work in a county child welfare agency for two years after graduation. The stipend program was created to improve the education and training of social workers for the publicly supported social services. However, the program is restricted to students pursuing careers in child welfare services. Therefore, since the shortage of professionally trained social workers acutely affects other areas of publicly supported social services, *the State should lobby the U.S. Congress to extend the stipend program to social work students who make*

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, go to: <http://calswec.berkeley.edu/CalSWEC/IV-E.html>

*commitments to work in other areas of service after graduation. Additionally, the State should lobby the U.S. Congress to extend the stipend program to undergraduate students. Finally, since financial assistance provides a significant incentive to students deciding on career paths, the state should support efforts to increase student participation in the program since the federal government has placed no cap on the number of students who may participate in the program each year.*

### **3. Create a statewide recruitment program for social workers.**

Currently, California spends millions of dollars to recruit individuals into the nursing and teaching professions. In 1997, the Legislature created the successful California Center for Teaching Careers (CalTeach).<sup>2</sup> Administered by the California State University Institute for Education Reform, CalTeach functions as a one-stop information, recruitment, and referral service for individuals considering or pursuing a teaching career. In the 2001-2002 legislative session, Assemblywoman Aroner authored AB 2920 to create such a program for social workers. Due to the state's fiscal conditions, Governor Davis vetoed the bill, but provided in his veto message that the bill's intent was meritorious. *The state should establish a program modeled after CalTeach, and in doing so, make an effort to compliment the social worker awareness campaign being implemented by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 535.*<sup>3</sup>

### **4. Support the expansion of high school human services academies.**

As early as high school, young adults begin making decisions about which career to pursue. Often, these decisions are made based upon students' exposure to specific industries and workforce sectors. Under this philosophy and in recognition that too few high school graduates pursue human service careers to meet the community's need for human services staff, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the Mental Health Association of Los Angeles County developed a human service academy at two local high schools.<sup>4</sup> Designed to prepare high school students for careers in human services, the academy serves approximately 300 high school students each year. LAUSD found that a majority of students (70%) who participate in the academy indicate an interest in pursuing a career in the human services upon high school graduation. Student participants tend to improve their grade point averages and attendance records, as well. The academies blend classroom instruction with mentoring, community service, after school jobs, and student and family support. A human service academy is currently being developed at Oakland Tech High School.<sup>5</sup> *The state should support efforts*

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<sup>2</sup> In a six-month period (January-June 2001), the CalTeach call center received 12,496 calls and the web site received 45 million hits. Out-of-state recruitment activities have identified over 2,000 individuals interested and ready to come to California to teach. Over a three-year period, CalTeach cost approximately \$12 million.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, go to: <http://www.seiu535.org/socialwork>, <http://www.2makeadifference.org>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information, contact Richard Van Horn, Mental Health Assoc. of Los Angeles, (213) 413-1130.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, contact Mike Lippitt, Alameda County Behavioral Health Care, (510) 567-8126.

*to expand human service academies in high schools statewide to help increase young peoples' exposure and interest in careers in human services. Trade unions' successful apprenticeship programs are also models for developing activities to attract new social workers.*

**5. Support the development of a career ladder for social service careers.**

Significant differences of opinion exist among social workers, professional associations, agency managers, and clients about the appropriate level of education and training individuals should attain to be considered "social workers." It seems, however, that all of the parties agree that there are many tasks that social workers currently perform, based on local, state, or federal requirements that could easily be performed by individuals who do not possess MSW degrees. This is especially true for the significant amount of paperwork social workers must complete when providing clients with publicly funded services. Utilizing non-MSW individuals with training in human services would not only alleviate the need for social workers to spend so much time on administrative tasks, but could also help provide pathways for individuals without graduate degrees to climb a career ladder in social services.

Presently, California does not have an identified pathway for social service careers, beginning in high school and concluding with graduate level degrees in social work. However, the University of California at Berkeley School of Social Welfare (UCB-SSW) recently conducted a survey of six existing pre- or para-professional human services training programs in California. These training programs, while not accredited by the Council on Social Work Education [which accredits Bachelors (BSW) and Masters (MSW) degree social work programs in the U.S.], have the potential to provide a significant pool of staff for public social services agencies, as well as provide entries into careers in social work. Alone, the six institutions surveyed enroll as many as 1,400 students in human service training programs each year. The California Mental Health Planning Council is reportedly working to make the community college human services certificate program the first step in a career pathway to becoming a mental health worker. *The state should not only work to develop and define a specific social services career ladder for California, but should also expand training opportunities to those who are interested in the field of social work, but have not yet attained appropriate professional degrees.* The California Employment Development Department (EDD) may be of assistance in this activity.

**6. Ensure public social service agencies adequately recruit and train staff to provide culturally appropriate services.**

In efforts to build the quantity of social workers in California, the state should also be mindful of the *quality* of that workforce. Given the population diversity in California, publicly supported agencies must be prepared to provide services to individuals from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and in a variety of languages. Professional social workers and social service agencies use the term "cultural competence" to identify the degree to which diverse clients are served appropriately. *The state should be mindful*

of the need to build a culturally competent workforce in California as it implements recruitment and training activities to build the social work workforce. The National Association of Social Work defines "cultural competence" as:

*"...the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each."*

**7. Urge and reinforce the expectation that California's institutions of higher education expand their enrollment of social work preparation programs.**

In the 2001-2002 legislative session, Assemblywoman Aroner authored ACR 215, which urges the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California to expand their enrollment in social work preparation programs in order to meet the growing social service demands of the people of California. The State should continue to encourage and provide resources for educational institutions to make this goal a reality. In 2001, UCB-SSW conducted a survey of the enrollment and expansion challenges facing thirteen schools of social work in California. Results of the survey indicate that while Deans and Directors have a strong desire to expand student enrollment in their programs, they face financial and political barriers to doing so. Additional results of this survey can be found in the Appendix of this report. The Appendix also includes enrollment expansion challenges faced by the California State University system, specifically, as reported in testimony to the Committee.

**8. Implement the recommendations included in the Master Plan for Social Work Education, which will be submitted to the Legislature by January 1, 2004.**

In the 2001-2002 legislative session, Assemblywoman Aroner authored ACR 215, which requests the following entities to develop a master plan for social work education in the State of California that reflects the state's diverse population and addresses the state's shortage of social workers:

- California Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work
- California Social Work Education Center
- California Community Colleges
- University of California
- California State University
- Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities
- Other interested stakeholders, including employers and representatives of populations served by social workers.

**9. In order to recruit more licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) from outside of California, increase California's reciprocity with other states' licensing requirements.**

States that currently regard clinical social work licenses from other states do not experience an increase in malpractice law suits, but have an easier time meeting their needs for clinical social workers. Assemblywoman Aroner has received dozens of phone calls and letters from clinical social workers who have moved to California, but are unable to practice because our state does not have "reciprocity" with other states' licenses.

**10. Require the California Board of Behavioral Sciences (BBS) to eliminate the oral portion of the LCSW examination.**

Testimony at hearings indicated that California is the only state that still includes an oral exam for LCSWs. While BBS staff have developed a legislative proposal to eliminate the oral portion of the exam, they have not identified an author for the legislation. *The Administration should consider sponsoring the BBS legislation.*

Retention: Strategies to Improve the Workplace of Social Workers

These five general areas were noted time and time again in testimony to the Committee about the challenging daily working conditions of social workers. *The state should encourage and provide resources to county agencies to ensure progress is made to implement each of these recommendations.*

**1. Establish and enforce reasonable social worker caseload standards.**

In testimony at all hearings, and in literature that documents the difficult daily work of social workers in publicly supported social service agencies, high caseloads are frequently mentioned. Managers of aging, child welfare, and disability services all admit to the far from ideal caseloads carried by their social workers. As in the case of the nurse-to-patient ratios recently established by the State, there is recognition among social work staff and clients that having too many cases to manage spreads workers too thin and, as a result, significantly impacts the quality of services clients receive.

**2. Provide adequate resources to public social service agencies for staff training and continuing education.**

County agencies mentioned in testimony on numerous occasions their lack of resources to provide incumbent staff with sufficient training and continuing education opportunities. Social work staff report that agencies which are willing to make training investments in them are more desirable to work for and remain employed for longer periods of time.

**3. Establish and enforce supervisor training standards in public social service agencies.**

In testimony, social workers often complain that they do not receive adequate or

effective support from their supervisors. In public social service agencies, it is often the case that effective line staff are quickly promoted to supervisory positions, but with little or no experience supervising social workers. Therefore, *the state must ensure that it provides adequate resources to agencies for supervisor training. The state could also encourage agencies to look to other disciplines with proven, effective management training programs, including the business sector.*

#### **4. Decrease social workers' administrative tasks.**

Due to federal, state, and local requirements, social workers must currently complete a significant amount of clerical and administrative tasks. Not only should the state encourage the use of clerical staff to complete these types of tasks, but should always *be mindful of the new requirements it imposes on line social workers to complete paperwork to document their services with clients. The state should consider conducting a review of the administrative requirements it currently places on social work staff to identify any which could be eliminated, simplified, or conducted by support staff.*

### **THE SIZE OF THE STATE'S SHORTAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

This section includes estimates of the shortage of social workers in California. Since social workers practice in a variety of publicly supported social service areas, the Committee gathered some estimates from specific service areas.

#### **SUPPLY OF SOCIAL WORK GRADUATES IS INADEQUATE**

UCB-SSW collected descriptive data available in 1998 on the number of students who graduate from California's thirteen schools of social work each year. Their survey found that there are fewer than 5,000 social work students in California (4,975), with about half in Masters in Social Work (MSW) degree programs and the other half in Bachelors in Social Work (BSW) degree programs. Additionally, the survey found that, in 1998:

- 1,509 students graduated from social work programs in California. Of those graduates, 65% earned MSWs and the other 35% earned BSWs.
- Schools of social work in California received 3,000 admission applications. Of these, approximately 1,500 were accepted into a program.
- Overall, enrollment in BSW programs has steadily increased over the past decade. However, MSW enrollment has remained stable.

#### **DEMAND FOR SOCIAL WORKERS OVERWHELMS THE STATE'S SUPPLY**

A recent study completed by Pasztor et al<sup>6</sup> found that, over the next five years, California will need approximately 25,280 new social workers. The study also estimates that public county agencies currently have approximately 12,221 social worker positions. If current

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<sup>6</sup> Pasztor, E., Saint-Germain, M., De Crescenzo, T. (2002). "Demand for Social Workers in California." Available online: [http://www.csus.edu/calst/Government\\_Affairs/Reports/Demand\\_for\\_Social\\_%20Workers.pdf](http://www.csus.edu/calst/Government_Affairs/Reports/Demand_for_Social_%20Workers.pdf).

demands for social workers continue into the future, as expected, the demand for social workers will continue to overwhelm the state's supply.

### SOCIAL WORKER SUPPLY IN CALIFORNIA IS LOWER THAN OTHER MAJOR STATES

Data collected in a study by UCB-SSW indicates that California produces fewer social work graduates, per capita, than other large states that have high levels of demand for social services. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the 1998 data from this study comparing California with three other large states.

**Table 1. Comparison of Social Work Graduates in Four Major States, 1998**

| State      | BSW Graduates | MSW Graduates | Total Social Work Graduates |
|------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| California | 711           | 1,108         | 1,819                       |
| Illinois   | 446           | 859           | 1,305                       |
| New York   | 505           | 2,042         | 2,547                       |
| Texas      | 827           | 598           | 1,425                       |

**Table 2. Per Capita MSW Enrollment and Graduation in Four Major States, 1998**

| State      | State Population* | MSW Students | Per Capita Enrollment** | MSW Graduates | Per Capita Graduation** |
|------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| California | 32,682,794        | 2,961        | 1 per 11,038            | 1,108         | 1 per 29,497            |
| Illinois   | 12,069,774        | 2,074        | 1 per 5,820             | 859           | 1 per 14,051            |
| New York   | 18,159,175        | 4,606        | 1 per 3,943             | 2,042         | 1 per 8,893             |
| Texas      | 19,712,389        | 1,431        | 1 per 13,775            | 598           | 1 per 32,964            |

\* Source: The Population Estimates Program, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC

\*\* Per capita numbers represent the number of MSW students or graduates per persons in the general population of each state

### VACANCY RATES FOR SOCIAL WORK POSITIONS ARE VERY HIGH IN ALL AREAS OF PUBLIC SOCIAL SERVICES IN CALIFORNIA

#### MENTAL HEALTH

*Social worker vacancy rate: Between 20 and 25%*

California's mental health system currently serves nearly 500,000 clients. According to the California Mental Health Planning Council, the statewide public mental health system has a vacancy rate of 22% for LCSWs and MSWs, combined. Among LCSWs alone, there is a vacancy rate of 25%. The Planning Council estimates that it would take 3 years time, hiring all social work graduates in California, for the publicly supported mental health system to fill its current vacancies. In testimony received at

hearings, Riverside County Mental Health reported a 20% vacancy rate. Currently, it takes Riverside County a minimum of 8 weeks to recruit and fill each vacant position.

#### DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

*Social worker vacancy rate: Approximately 25%*

*Social worker turnover rate: Approximately 19%*

Regional centers, the community system of care for the developmentally disabled, currently serve 170,000 clients. Each year, the size of the population served by regional centers grows by 5%. Statewide, the centers report that they need 2,005 service coordinator social workers immediately. In testimony received at hearings, it was reported that Marin, San Francisco, and San Mateo regional centers experienced a 19% turnover in social workers last year. At the time of the hearing, Golden Gate Regional Center reported at least 10 vacant social work positions that month and Regional Center of the East Bay reported 23 vacancies. State developmental centers, which serve approximately 3,600 clients, report a 25% vacancy rate.

#### CHILD WELFARE

*Social worker vacancy rate: Approximately 11%*

*Social worker turnover rate: As high as 50%*

The state's child welfare services system serves over 140,000 children and families. In any given month, the ten largest county child welfare agencies employ 7,500 social workers and report a 10.5% vacancy rate. It is estimated that 3,400 new social workers are immediately needed among the largest 10 counties (50% more than they currently have). Among the 15 smallest county child welfare agencies, turnover is as high as 50%.

#### AGING SERVICES

*Social worker vacancy rate: Between 20 and 30%*

#### SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

Of 7,000 public schools in California, there are only approximately 400 to 500 school social workers.

### **FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE STATE'S SOCIAL WORKER SHORTAGE**

This section provides brief explanations of the factors that are reported to contribute to the state's inadequate supply of social workers. The factors described in this section reportedly cause publicly supported agencies to experience difficulties -- both in the initial recruitment and hiring of social work positions, and also in retaining social work staff. This section is intended only to provide a short summary of the factors reported at Committee hearings. A significant amount of literature is available to readers interested in further explanation of any of these, and other, factors contributing to this workforce issue. Additionally, many

factors have previously been alluded to in the recommendations section of this report.

## I. INCREASED DEMAND FOR SOCIAL WORK SERVICES

Testimony received at the hearings indicated that, in many areas of publicly supported social services, more social work staff are needed because the client population has grown and their needs have become more numerous and complex over the past decade. For example,

testimony on child welfare services indicated that, just during the past two years, the numbers of child abuse or neglect allegations, the number of juvenile court contests, and the numbers of appeals have increased significantly. In testimony, it was recommended that more social workers are needed at the "front end" of the child welfare system to prevent children and families from entering the child welfare system.

According to testimony at hearings, today's disabled clients have more serious problems than those of four or five years ago. Additionally, testimony indicated that Patton State Hospital's clients have become increasingly dangerous. Social workers are increasingly burdened by clerical duties. In aging services, the population of elderly (especially over age 85) has significantly grown over the last decade. In fact, the need for social workers in the Adult Protective Services (APS) system has drained workers out of child welfare services. Testimony from Los Angeles County APS indicated that cases have increased significantly over the past few years. APS workers in Los Angeles currently carry 50 to 100 cases each. While APS used to solely perform crisis intervention, its role has expanded to "care management," which increases their staffing needs. Each enhancement to aging services results in an increased need for social workers. Similarly, mental health services are also experiencing an increased need for staff, as they have received increased funding for services over the past few years.

## II. WORKLOAD AND CASELOAD

Testimony at hearings indicated that two major areas of workload challenges pose difficulties in both attracting and retaining social workers in California. First, testimony indicated significant concern about the administrative and clerical tasks required of social workers. Second, many are substantially concerned with the caseloads social workers currently have. However, this issue is particularly cyclical. That is, having an inadequate number of staff requires existing staff to shoulder more work. This results in additional stress and pressure on existing staff, sometimes prompting them to leave their jobs. Therefore, augmenting the number of staff will have the consequence of giving the state the ability to decrease workloads and improve social worker retention. The study directed by SB 2030 (Costa, Chapter 785, Statutes of 1998) established a set of caseload standards, of which the Administration is familiar. Clearly, there are resources and attention being paid to this challenge in California, especially in the area of child welfare services.

### III. WAGES

Staff and managers often reported at hearings that social workers are greatly under paid, given the stress that accompanies their work in public agencies. Small counties have particular problems attracting highly qualified individuals because their wages are lower. Testimony from individuals in aging services indicated that their biggest barrier in filling vacant positions is the lack of candidates willing to work for the sector's low wages. Like teaching, social work has not historically been a highly paid area of employment. However, women have traditionally been over-represented among individuals employed in both sectors. Today, women simply have greater options and opportunities to pursue higher-paying, less stressful careers. It will be increasingly more difficult to attract individuals into a profession that requires a master's degree, yet pays so much less than other sectors.

### IV. PUBLIC IMAGE

It has been documented that the public has both an uncertain and sometimes negative public image of the social work profession. Often times, media attention to social work and publicly supported social services focuses on the negative, although infrequent, outcomes for clients of their services. This negative and/or vague perception is a certain barrier to be confronted in all activities aimed at attracting more individuals into the social work profession.

## APPENDIX

### Increasing Student Enrollment: Challenges facing California's social worker preparation programs.

In 2001, the University of California at Berkeley, School of Social Welfare (UCB-SSW) conducted a telephone survey of the enrollment and expansion challenges facing thirteen schools of social work in California. Major findings include:

- Almost all schools are already producing graduates at, or beyond, their programs' capacities.
- A majority of the Deans and Directors surveyed would consider expanding their programs if additional funding were available. In total, increased funding could produce as many as 900 more social graduates annually.
- Half of the schools currently have caps on enrollment capacities. Of the capped programs surveyed, most caps were instituted by the schools' administrations. Schools with caps also reported that student-teacher ratios enforced by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) played a role in their program sizes. Additionally, schools reported having less power to make changes in their Bachelors degree programs than in their Masters Degree programs since undergraduate program decisions are made by upper administration.
- The Deans and Directors surveyed believe that integrating para-professionals into social work practice would have a notable effect on the shortage of social workers.

In testimony to the Committee, the California State University (CSU) system reported the following specific challenges to expanding social worker preparation programs:

- Capacity: Growth in CSU's social work programs has been sporadic, rather than planned, throughout its history. Since around 1994, increases in enrollment are attributed to the additional resources provided by the Title IV-E stipend program (described later in this document) and the addition of part-time attendance options for non-traditional students. Expressed was the need for a plan to increase the number of new social work programs at CSU campuses. The plan should address CSU's faculty and infrastructure needs and use non-traditional modalities, such as distance learning.
- Student Retention: Retention efforts are greatly needed because individuals applying to social work programs on CSU campuses tend to have many challenges to maintaining their enrollment (i.e., first in their families to graduate college, slightly older than traditional college students, heads of households, employed while attending school).
- Recruiting: Recruitment efforts are greatly needed because applicant pools are declining. One effective method for increasing the numbers of applicants is developing more student financial aid.