

Dear Social Service Practitioners,

In the previous letter, I had looked at the relationship between policy and micro practice and the six lessons that practitioners have garnered over the decades in shaping policy deliberations and outcomes. So what is it about social work education and training that make social workers ready for policy practice and to contribute decisively to policy work?

Social Work Concepts, Values, Beliefs



In social work, policy practice is often defined as using the skills learnt in social work to propose and change policies in order to better achieve the goal of social and economic justice. Social workers apply generalist social work perspectives (concepts, values and beliefs) and skills to influence changes in law, rules, resource allocation through working with policy, and resource owners. Social work practice is guided by the values that the profession holds such as service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

Social Work Skills



Social workers also apply the skills of engagement, assessment, problem solving and negotiation, communication, goal setting, planning, implementing, networking and collaboration, and monitoring progress beyond individuals when influencing change in the larger social systems. This includes laws and social conditions that will affect the lives of larger numbers of families and individuals.

- a) **Assessment skills** enable social workers to understand problems, develop, analyse and propose workable solutions while taking into account the circumstances and environment of the people involved. As social workers are in direct work with clients and those affected by policies, they are able to provide insights that can shape policies and outcomes.
- b) **Engagement skills** enable social workers to develop trusting relationships with a wide variety of clients from many different backgrounds and experiences. These same skills when applied to policy practice, foster the development and nurturing of relationships with stakeholders in policy settings. Building relationships across these different stakeholders requires the ability to be open, honest, and respectful to all, while making one's social work perspective clear. As a participant in the process, social workers must earn the trust of others so that they are seen as presenting facts and information to others in an honest, straightforward manner; acknowledging a variety of perspectives, and pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of each of the options available. Influence in the policy process is gained through the relationships that are developed.
- c) **Communication skills** enable social workers to establish and maintain relationships with individuals and families. Social workers learn to "start where the client is" with active listening in order to understand the world from the individual's perspective. Likewise in policy practice, communication skills such as being able to articulate convincingly and objectively and making a case eloquently, are important when proposing an amendment to a rule, a law or a policy. Social workers can also use writing skills to prepare reports on issues, talking points for networks, and policy briefs to distribute to policy makers.

d) **Problem solving and negotiating skills** are essential in direct practice with individuals and families when working to generate alternative options for new directions and new actions. Social workers in family work are often facilitating each party to develop solutions that will result in a win-win situation for everyone. Similarly, in policy work, there will always be trade-offs from any choice of a solution. Active negotiation, deliberation, and creating an openness to discuss the trade-offs can enable conviction and commitment to policy implementation later on. Often, the long term goal may have to wait, and a more palatable or fiscally practical solution and interim measure may be implemented. What is important is that policy makers, practitioners and stakeholders find ways to negotiate and find common ground to pursue the long term goal.



Social Change

Many in the social sector want to see lives improve. Others outside the social sector including housing, health, education and environment also play significant roles in improving lives. But what is the space that social work and social policy interact most to create social change? It may lie in the never-a-sweet spot where social workers, social service practitioners and clients share their challenges, advocate for policy change and service deliveries that keep pace with the complexities that often work against the efforts of individuals, families and communities that seek improvements. It takes time, discipline and commitment to influence change. The earlier we appreciate this and persevere on our goals in the common ground, the more purposeful we might be.

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