

## Association Spotlight: Social Welfare Action Alliance

Contributed by Linda Grobman, ACSW, LSW

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Editor's Note: There are many different professional associations and other groups for social workers. In this occasional column, we will feature a variety of such organizations.

The Social Welfare Action Alliance (SWAA) is a national organization of progressive workers in social welfare. Formerly the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society, the SWAA was founded in 1985 and is based on key principles that reflect a concern for social justice, peace, and coalition building with progressive social movements. According to Michael A. Dover, BSW, MSW, Ph.D., a founding member and co-chair of the SWAA membership committee, "SWAA is an organization that believes that social workers should be serious about social change." We talked to Dover, an assistant professor at Central Michigan University. Here's what he had to say:

How would you describe the SWAA?

The existence of SWAA, which was founded in 1985 as the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society and recently changed its name, reflects the fact that people in social work come from a wide variety of interests, including those who are very interested in social and political action as social workers, and those who are social workers during the day but peace activists, civil rights activists, GLBT rights activists, environmentalists, animal rights activists, you name it, your typical social activist, on the side. We changed our name in part because a lot of people don't know who Bertha Reynolds is, even though NASW has reprinted her books and one can read about her in the Encyclopedia of Social Work. You can read about this progressive tradition and about BCRS/SWAA in the book, *The Road Not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States*, by Michael Reisch and Janice Andrews.

How is it different from other social work organizations?

We're different from the mainstream group, NASW, although more than half of our members also belong to NASW or CSWE or BPD or NABSW or other national groups in social work. We're different in that, for one thing, we are more open to [people without social work degrees], although the overwhelming majority of our members are BSWs and MSWs. True, NASW has Associate Member status, and NABSW has always welcomed [non-BSWs and non-MSWs], but for SWAA, it is a principle that we are open to social workers, human service workers, and other community-based anti-poverty and other activists. We're also the only organization in social work that is explicitly on the port side of the social work ship—in other words, we are on the political left, which we define broadly as being progressive.

{quote\_top}What are some benefits of joining SWAA?

We provide access to a national network of activists in social work, via our membership directory available in the "members only" section of our Web site. This is one way in which people interested in relocating get in touch with other like-minded social workers around the country. Our directory lists members by their areas of activism and by the areas of practice, so it makes possible talking and e-mailing with others who share your interests. For those in rural areas who are likely the only radical social worker around, it's a huge help to be able to network.

There is a semi-annual newsletter with thought-provoking articles, and members can write for the newsletter, as well. There are discounts on social justice oriented publications, such as a subscription to the *Journal of Progressive Human Services* for only \$25. And there is an annual conference—this year it is June 16-18 in Chicago. Members get either a discount on their registration or a new or renewed membership for a year as part of their registration fee.

Who can join?

Anyone who generally shares our statement of principles and pays dues, which are \$10 for students and \$35 for others, can join. The membership form is on our Web site.

Are there special activities and/or benefits for students?

There is the student/low income membership category, which allows people who are recent graduates and can't afford the \$35 rate to join for \$10. There is a Student Caucus meeting at our national conference each year, and there are usually student-run workshops there.

Are there student leaders in the organization?

Students are leaders in a couple of ways. First, often our chapters are basically student chapters, and students can represent chapters on the National Steering Committee, under our bylaws. Also, last year at our national conference, a Student Caucus was formed, and two representatives of that Caucus, Kathy Welsh and Valerie Austin, attended our last National Steering Committee meeting in New York City in October.

How/why did you get involved in this particular organization?

In 1985, I was working as a social worker in New Orleans with a group named Social Workers for Social Change. We had been working to defend the special tax that supported public welfare in New Orleans and on behalf of senior citizens who were being evicted from subsidized housing. We had taken social workers to the 20th Anniversary of the March on Washington on August 27, 1983, and many worked for Jesse Jackson, who won the Louisiana Primary.

There were other groups of activist social workers around the country, and there used to be a group called Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament, as well. We all agreed there was a need for a national organization.

At the Summer 1985 conference at Smith College on the life of Bertha Capen Reynolds, we had a meeting of those who felt we needed to form an organization that would revive and continue the progressive tradition in social work and social welfare. We issued a Call to Join that was signed by many leaders in the field, including Chauncey Alexander, Millie Charles, and Maryann Mahaffey, as well as several hundred others. We had our founding meeting at the October 1985 NASW conference in Chicago and our first conference the following summer at Smith College, which was where Bertha Reynolds taught.

Do you have any other comments or thoughts to share with social work students and/or new social workers about SWAA?

I was a relatively "new" social worker in 1985, just a few years out of my MSW program, and some of the less new social workers at the time responded to our youthful energy in supporting the founding of BCRS/SWAA. But at this point, we need another generation of new social workers who believe there is a need for an organization such as SWAA, which can work to stimulate activism among other social workers as well as pressure NASW and CSWE and other groups to live up to our profession's ideals.

#### SWAA At a Glance

##### Who

Social Welfare Action Alliance (SWAA). Members live throughout the U.S., Canada, and other countries. They are case workers, community organizers, faculty members, therapists, union activists, administrators, and researchers. They are BSW, MSW, and doctoral level social workers, as well as social welfare workers from a variety of backgrounds.

##### What

A national organization of progressive social workers and other human service workers. Members of SWAA work to promote a progressive agenda through creative activism. They build local chapters; organize public forums and discussions; present papers, books, and lectures; build alliances with poor people's movements; and participate in actions consonant with SWAA's principles and objectives. The organization holds an annual conference, publishes a semi-annual newsletter, and distributes the works of Bertha Capen Reynolds and other writers whose works are consistent with its mission.

##### When

Founded in 1985. Newsletter published semi-annually. Annual conference in June.

##### Why

To continue the progressive legacy of Bertha Capen Reynolds, an eminent social worker, author, trade unionist, and social activist who challenged the basic tenets of her field by calling for greater attention to the full range of human needs, and was dedicated to eradicating the root causes of war and the inequalities in the structure and values of society.

#### How

To find more information on what the SWAA is doing and how to join, see <http://www.socialwelfarealliance.org>.

#### Quote

“The real choice before us as social workers is whether we are to be passive or active.”  
Bertha Capen Reynolds