

# An American Social Worker in London

Contributed by Devon Rocha, MSW

If you have just graduated or will graduate in the coming months, you may find yourself wondering what lies ahead in the world of work. Or maybe you are just starting out in your education and training, simply exploring the many facets of social work to see where your interests and passions lie. While you are pondering, allow me to throw in another possibility: what about the experience of working abroad?

## Decisions, Decisions, Decisions!

Of course, the decision to move more than 3,500 miles away from family, friends, and everything you know cannot be made lightly. This is particularly true after just completing an intensive (and expensive) 2+ years in a master's program in social work, or possibly longer if you are just finishing your bachelor's degree. It is likely that by this point the only thing you want to do is get out there, put your new skills to use, and start changing the world (and not to mention, start making some money for when loan repayment begins)!

On the other hand...given the opportunity to experience the magic, mystery, and romance of a foreign city, and most importantly, work in your chosen profession in another country altogether, you almost have to go. This is the reasoning I pursued in making my decision to move to London as a new MSW graduate. I thought: what better way to gain a broad, international perspective in social work as well as be better positioned to see different parts of the world? What You Need To Do

Your recent (or current) student status is the main advantage here, because you can very easily obtain a work permit for the United Kingdom through a student work abroad organization based in the United States. Otherwise, it can be difficult to live and work legally in the UK as an American citizen. UK immigration does offer various work permit schemes, but the easiest and surefire way is to obtain a student work permit through BUNAC. They simply require proof of your student status or that you are within one semester of your last full-time semester if you have just graduated. There is a fee for the permit, which is then valid for six months from your arrival date in the UK. Social workers are in high demand in the UK, so landing a job is not difficult. Additionally, there are plenty of social service employment agencies around to get you those interviews.

You will be a more attractive job candidate if you make an application to the General Social Care Council. This is the body that governs the practice standards of social workers in the UK. It is not unlike individual state licensure bodies in the U.S. The purpose is to ensure that your education and qualifications match those requirements to practice under the title of social worker that are in place in the UK. A master's degree in social work actually exceeds the qualifications of the Diploma in Social Work, which is their qualifying degree. (It is more similar to a bachelor's level degree in America.) Consequently, acceptance onto the GSCC register is practically a given if you hold a master's degree. This is an important formality, since prospective employers want the assurance that you do indeed possess the qualifications necessary to be employed as a social worker. If you do not get registered with the GSCC, you can still go to the UK and get a job; however, you might work in a different level position, such as a Social Work Support Worker or Family Support Worker. Leaving It All Behind

With my work permit in hand and my name accepted onto the GSCC register, I put my belongings into storage, handed off my cats to a very kind friend, and headed across the Atlantic! This story is not all glamour and glitz, however, as the first few days were rough. The long flight and my early morning arrival in London the next day left me sleep deprived and cruelly unable to check into my hostel until late in the afternoon for some much needed sleep and shower. (Tip: pack that toothbrush in the carry-on bag.) Definitely the saddest part of arriving in England (apart from my teary-eyed mother waving good-bye at the airport) was exchanging my dollars and receiving roughly half of the original amount back in pounds based on the exchange rate.

Fortunately, the interviews came in quickly. I declined the first couple, as my employment agency works with social services agencies across the whole of the United Kingdom and I was hoping to stay in the London area. I did take an interview for a children and youth team in Essex, a very large county to the north of London. So I boarded a train from Liverpool Street and headed about 25 minutes outside of London. I was surprised to meet my interviewers sans the (American) statutory handshake and to be finished talking in less than 15 minutes. I was even more surprised to receive a job offer later that evening, and to begin work the following Monday.

## Similarities and Differences

I was placed on a continuing care team, whose purpose was to meet the needs of children who are "looked

afterwards by the county local authority, which is roughly equivalent to state-run departments of children and family services. This is quite similar to a typical case management position in the states and involves visiting the children (usually in foster care), speaking to their foster carers and teachers, and putting into action their individual plans for permanency.

On my first day at work, I was surprised to be bombarded with unending offers for a cup of coffee or tea. I soon realized that office etiquette dictates that you offer everyone in the vicinity coffee or tea before making some for yourself. Additionally, the brewed cup of coffee (‘filter coffee’) is an anomaly here, in favor of the dilution of a spoonful of instant coffee into a cup of hot water. Fortunately, after a couple of weeks on the job, I was able to resurrect an actual coffeemaker that had long been forgotten. I also learned that I was far from the only ‘foreigner’ in the office. Here, it is not uncommon to work with people from South Africa, Greece, Australia, and throughout Europe. This results in a surround of highly skilled and dedicated social workers with a mix of unique perspectives on child welfare issues.

The families involved with child welfare social services here are plagued by many of the same problems as those in the states—drugs, low income, mental illness, and a prior involvement in the child welfare system. Also similar is a high turnover of social workers. Despite the obvious drive to attract employees with the overseas recruitment of workers, retaining workers is a challenge. Low budgets for salaries and raises plague social service providers here just as they do in the U.S. Obtaining a job through a staffing agency, however, will prove to be more lucrative than joining on as a part of the regular staff. Many social worker positions through staffing agencies will start at or around 18 pounds per hour, which is roughly equivalent to \$30 per hour, which is not bad for your first position out of school.

One unexpected challenge that came along with my new job in England was the necessity of driving. Essex is not as well connected with public transportation as is London. It is also quite a far-reaching county. It is not uncommon to need to travel to foster homes located over an hour’s drive away. So, my employment agency worked with Essex to rent me a car. My driver’s license is valid here for one year, but since I was driving a county car, I needed to pass a driving test. Unfortunately, my driving test coincided with my first time driving on the left side of the road inside the right side of the car! Indeed, I did not pass my driving test and needed to participate in a practice session. In my defense, I did actually fare pretty well if not for England’s love of roundabouts!

### Staying Longer

I have often been asked by Britons with incredulity, ‘Why would you want to come and live/work here?’ It surprises me every time. I think that sometimes people can forget the large world that exists beyond their country, city, or backyard; but I guess I did not expect it here on another side of the globe. I definitely miss family, friends, and the general familiarity and ease that goes along with residing in your country of citizenship. This experience has opened my eyes to what I take for granted at home. But alas, I have decided to stay longer, beyond my initial 6-month work permit. I was encouraged to apply for a permanent position with Essex within my first week of work. So I made an application and aimed high—I applied for a senior practitioner post, just a notch above social worker. My master’s degree coursework and fieldwork, along with volunteer experience in the field, helped my application. I interviewed a month after my start date.

I feel very lucky to be moving out of a case management position and into more direct assessment work. My new position will involve preparing assessments for court and possibly initiating some group work. In order for me to be able to stay longer, Essex applied for and ‘sponsored’ a work permit for me. While I did not need a visa to come with my student work permit, I will need to return to the states to obtain one for my new work permit, which is valid for four years.

I will probably stay in England for at least another year. The time-off policies are excellent and I am eligible for four weeks of paid vacation as a member of ‘permanent’ staff! This will give me time to get around to the many wonderfully accessible destinations, such as Scotland, Ireland, France, Belgium, and well, let’s face it—the whole of Europe is within very easy and inexpensive travel from London. I am hoping that this experience will beef up my résumé for when I do eventually return to live and work at home. Until then, London will serve nicely as my home away from home.

I hope that this gives a good picture of what could be open to you as you embark on your professional life as a social worker. British to American terminology translation

bin = trash can  
boot = trunk of car  
bonnet = hood of car

chips = fries  
dodgy = sketchy, questionable  
first floor = second floor, i.e., above the "ground" floor or entrance  
garden = backyard  
jumper = sweater  
motorway = highway, expressway  
pants = underwear  
quid = cash, bucks  
solicitor = lawyer  
zed = the letter z

#### Geographical/political definitions

Britain = the name of the island itself  
England = the country occupying the southeast portion of the island  
Great Britain = the political union of England, Scotland, and Wales  
United Kingdom = refers to England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland  
The British Isles = the above including the independent nation of Ireland

#### Some Web Sites to Visit Before You Go

Work abroad with BUNAC: <http://www.bunac.org>  
The social services placement agency that worked with me:  
<http://www.uk-pro.net>  
General Social Care Council: <http://www.gsc.org.uk/Home>  
British Association of Social Workers: <http://www.basw.co.uk>  
Information on working in the UK: <http://www.workpermit.com>

Devon Rocha, MSW, lives and works in London. She graduated from Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work in May 2005.

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