

Overhauling the Image of the Social Worker

Contributed by Susan C. Westgate, LGSW

As social workers, we are all conscious of the fights that we must fight—the forces that we can and cannot control, the political powers that seek to diminish the spirits of our clients, and the social stigmas attached to the issues that are essentially the meat of our work. However, we must also seek to confront and hold true to our professional roots regarding issues within our own system of functioning, such as: steadfast adherence to ethical standards, working to empower vs. enable our clientele, and seeking to expand upon the image of the social worker.

It is an undeniable reality that much of the population has a limited view of what a social worker is and what a social worker does. Many people believe us to exclusively be nonprofit case managers, to work only with families and children, to be the entities that divide families vs. unite them, and to be professionals within a field rampant with high turnover and even higher burnout. We must reflect on these commonly held images and discern what they mean. Furthermore, we must determine together what it means to be a social worker. An Adopted Image

I now offer up my adopted image of what it means to be a social worker. We are agents of change who pull from a strengths-based philosophy and that abide by the core belief system that all who come to us for help are entitled to such assistance. We are agents of change who believe that we are capable of providing aid through ethically conscious interventions drawn from individual and social empowerment. We are agents of change who believe that equality can heal wounds caused by racism, homophobia, heterosexism, patriarchy, classism, and oppression. We are agents of change who want to end oppression. These are the social problems that we battle, and these are the values that we draw from to initiate the social change process.

Who we are as professionals, how we work toward social change, and the venues that we work in are boundless. It is time to discard the historical image of the social worker and to acknowledge that we exist in for- as well as nonprofit arenas, that we work within political systems, that we have an impact on not only individuals, but also policy formation, that we can and do run for political offices, and that we consult with educational institutions and major national and international organizations. Furthermore, we must also remind ourselves that we are not lone agents of change, and that instead we are connected to one another by our shared beliefs and core professional values.

We must shed the historical image of the social worker also not only as a means to diversify our professional base and experience, but also to ensure the survival of our professional discipline. Demonstration of adaptation and flexibility serves to demonstrate professional competency to our clients and also demonstrates the vitality or life force that exists within this profession. Diversification of our professional base and vocational avenues also serves to bolster interest in those expressing early interest in the field. Reinventing Ourselves

Becoming a social worker often begins with becoming interested in the notion of helping—of wanting to influence society in a meaningful and lasting way. However, many of those expressing early interest in the field become discouraged as a result of the perpetuated image of what a social worker is or does. These words are offered up not only to that audience, but also to already existing professionals. Social workers need to reinvent themselves and what we do in order to bring vitality and professional energy into this field. We must collectively recognize that helping, aiding, and supporting others in need may be our common thread—the thing that drives us into this profession with such passion and vigor. However, while that desire may be the initial spark, we must work to recognize that there are endless creative forms of providing support and assistance to individuals, groups, and communities in need. Ingenuity and creativity are often the things that best reach our clientele because such creative outreach efforts are often the efforts that clients regard as special and exceptional. These unique efforts and forms of our work are also the things that continually breathe new life into the profession.

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