



The Social Service Workforce and the Practice of Working with Vulnerable Children and Families

February 19th, 2014

A symposium to explore how we measure the efficacy of the social service workforce, what tools are available for such measurements, and how we measure efforts to strengthen the workforce.

Panel 1: Learning About Measuring the Social Service Workforce from the Experience of Other Social Sectors

Jessica Rose, the Senior Technical Advisor for Monitoring and Evaluation on the Health Systems Strengthening Team at USAID, moderated presentations and a discussion about the lessons we can learn from other social sectors, such as health and legal sectors, as we attempt to better understand the social service workforce. Jim McCaffery, a Senior Advisor at CapacityPlus and the Training Resources Group, summarized learning from years' worth of efforts to measure the global health workforce. He emphasized the need for a long-term, holistic approach to measuring social service workforce development as well as creative thinking in an era of ever-scarce resources. Helen de Pinho, Assistant Professor of Population and Family Health at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and Associate Director of the Averting Maternal Death and Disability Program, shared her work to better understand and support associate clinicians within health systems throughout sub-Saharan Africa, stressing the importance of ensuring clear roles and responsibilities for workers at all levels while not overlooking the importance of various factors that influence health workers' motivation. Speaking from the perspective of the US legal sector and as the co-founder of the Child Advocacy Clinic, Jane Spinak, the Edward Ross Aranow Professor of Law at Columbia University, questioned what we can learn from the American child protection system, arguing that social workers working within the system are measuring outputs based on forms and checklists rather than child-focused outcomes; she suggested a radical shift in the system away from one that takes an accusatory stance against parents and families. The presentations led to a discussion about the enormous challenge that measuring the global social service workforce presents and the need for concerted action to begin to tackle this challenge.

Panel 2: The State of the Evidence Concerning Social Service Workforce Strengthening

With facilitation from Maury Mendenhall, Senior Technical Advisory on Orphans and Vulnerable Children at USAID's Office of HIV/AIDS, this panel examined the current knowledge base around the social service workforce, both domestically in the United States and globally. Drawing upon decades of domestic research undertaken by the National Association of Social Work as well other pieces of research, Joan Zlotnik, the Director of the Social Work Policy Institute, laid out several of the key pieces of learning about the social service workforce that have emerged in the United States: explorations of manageable workloads, studies about the roles of peer support and supervision, and examinations of opportunities for advancement, burn-out, and morale. Sharing a case story methodology that she used while researching the social service workforce in states



throughout Nigeria, Rebecca Davis, Associate Professor at Rutgers School of Social Work and Director of the Center for International Social Work Studies, explained how this rich qualitative data provided a deeper understanding of how community members and social workers were conceptualizing and handling child protection issues in a way that other methodologies were not capturing. Mari Hickmann, the Monitoring and Evaluation Program Advisor at Futures Group International, presented about indicators that the MEASURE Evaluation project has been developing to determine the status of social workforce systems globally, including measurements related to regulatory bodies, workforce standards, training programs, and data analysis and information sharing. Finally, Mark Preston, Assistant Professor at the Columbia University School of Social Work, shared recent research about the relationship between goal-related feedback and workforce motivation from social service workers in the United States and in Jordan, laying out the need for using a strength-based lens (e.g., examination of the proactive behaviors and self-motivation in the social service workforce) instead of a deficit-based lens to assess social workers' performance and motivation. Taken together, the presentations ranged from the micro-level considerations related to individual social workers to macro studies that spanned the entire workforce in given countries, demonstrating that there is a solid body of literature available and upon which future research can build.

Panel 3: University Research and Training Partnerships for Faculty Development

The symposium's third panel turned slightly away from research "proper" to an exploration of efforts to university-based partnerships to develop domestic and global faculty capacity to teach and to undertake research related to the social service workforce. Moderated by Mette Christiansen, the Director of the Concentration in Human Services in the Department of Sociology at New Paltz State University, the panel featured innovative efforts in Indonesia, Afghanistan, and New York to build university-based partnerships to strengthen the social service workforce, focusing on how the leaders of such efforts conceptualize and measure success. Martha Haffey, the Director of the Building Professional Social Work project and a retired Associate Professor of the Silber School of Social Work at Hunter College, shared her experience developing a social work curriculum in Indonesia in collaboration with Indonesian universities, the Indonesian government, and the NGO Save the Children, a curriculum that bridged local concepts of social support with global standards. Associate Professor of Social Work at the Silberman School and the Chair of Global Social Work and Practice with Immigrants and Refugees Martha Bragin also shared her experience using a method developed by the government of Afghanistan, the DaCUM method, to develop a social work curriculum in that country. Finally, Tina Maschi, Associate Professor at the Fordham University School of Social Service and the Founder and Executive Director of the Be the Evidence project, presented her work through various partnerships throughout the US to help social workers bridge learning and action. These three approaches as well as others discussed by symposium participants served as models for developing the capacity of universities to strengthen social services and highlighted the importance of sharing lessons learned both domestically and internationally.