

Campaigning for Social Justice: Increasing Public Access to Professional Social Workers

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Abstract: From 2011 to January 2014, the Connecticut Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW/CT) embarked on an unprecedented and ultimately successful campaign to change state hiring practices so that clients of state agencies would receive services delivered by professional social workers. Just as clients of private agencies receive care by professional social workers, so should recipients of public sector social services. It is a social justice issue. This reflection presents that campaign from the perspectives of three of the many key players who were instrumental to its success.

The main characters in this narrative are Stephen Karp, NASW/CT executive director for more than 20 years; Christine Limone, NASW/CT newly hired political director, and Raymie Wayne, chapter president from 2012 to 2014. Highlights of our thinking processes include the strategic public relations decisions and the fine judgment calls in community organizing practice that are often oversimplified in textbooks.

Steve: As a community organizer, looking for a window of opportunity to change a bad policy is as instinctual as a trick-or-treater looking for candy. It is what you do. The largest window of opportunity of my career swept in with the 2011 Connecticut Gubernatorial election. For 22 years, I had been responding to calls from NASW members every time the title “social worker” was misused in the media. Sure, I wrote letters to the editor and targeted recidivist reporters to educate the media and the public about real social work credentials, but it was repetitive, never ending work.

Asking reporters to use the title “case manager” for non-degreed workers was Band-Aid advocacy, it was a temporary correction that did nothing to improve service delivery. The real cure would be to have credentialed social workers provide the care offered by the state. I believed our new Governor, who we had supported during his campaign, would be approachable. I therefore planned to ask him to change the state hiring practices so that professionally credentialed social workers were in state social work positions. Radical idea, I know. If successful, this could be a win on many fronts: consumers of state agencies who are among the state’s most vulnerable residents, would receive care by real professional social workers, social work degrees (BSW and MSW) would be recognized and valued, and media reports about state social workers

would reflect the work of real social workers!

If We Don’t Do it, Who Will?

Steve: My first step was to gain buy-in from the chapter’s Board of Directors for a campaign that was going to be heavy on resources (especially my time). Though the board is responsible for major policy decisions, it was not unusual for me to bring initiatives and recommendations to their attention. In practice, this is how most boards and their directors operate (Hardcastle, Powers & Wenocur, 2011, p. 230). I recall telling the board that at best we had a 50/50 chance of success. I was elated when after some discussion, the board voted to support a campaign. I noted, however, that at least some board members misunderstood the campaign as a title protection effort, which would simply require that the state (and others) refrain from calling non-degreed employees social workers. Instead, I was proposing that we get the state to hire only degreed social workers. It corrected the misuse of the title by changing the practice to match the language, not the language to match the practice.

Raymie: I was a member of the board and Executive Committee, and was running for chapter president when Steve brought the idea of the campaign to the board for discussion. Steve had distributed a detailed memo outlining his rationale for such a campaign. He supplemented his memo with a verbal presentation at the meeting, including the anticipated resources and likelihood of success. In my memory, the campaign had been presented as something that would require a lot of effort, some fiscal resources, and would most likely be unsuccessful. It is interesting to see that Steve recalls reporting a 50/50 likelihood of success.

At the board discussion, I was among the first to speak. My first thought, and my statement to my board

colleagues was, “if we don’t do this, who will?” Even if we were not to be successful, it was most definitely our fight. I also thought that success was not an all-or-nothing proposition. There could be little wins along the way that would justify the effort. In the discussion, I noted that even if unsuccessful with regards to the ultimate goal, surely the effort would improve social work’s public image. Though it was presented as a risk, I could not see a downside. Others spoke as well, some suggesting they thought we were seeking title protection. In the end, there was a unanimous vote to proceed. We ended the meeting with enthusiasm and hope for the future, with no idea of what was to come.

The Data Dilemma

Raymie: Our first challenge was to find research that would support our contention that the social work degree makes a difference in the quality of services delivered. I recalled seeing research years back that degreed social workers had lower rates of burnout than their non-degreed counterparts. However, there was minimal research available, and what could be located was contradictory, out-of-date, or narrowly focused on child welfare, rather than state systems as a whole. Though some of the child welfare research was helpful, our campaign spanned all state agencies and services. As we assembled the data, citing articles as far back as 1987, we knew that the older studies lost much of their relevance. Our audience, however, would be unlikely to notice the actual citations. Sure enough, we were never challenged on the sources used for our fact sheets or the data behind our arguments.

The fact that some of the data was contradictory was troubling, especially because we believed our campaign was serving the public good and not just the profession. After all, we were fighting so that low-income residents could have the same access to degreed workers as residents with private insurance. In actuality, the limited number of studies, made it difficult to draw any real conclusions. Reflecting on standards for the application of research, I realized that the studies that found that the social work degree was not determinative of better practice needed to be replicated to demonstrate reliability, and variation to show to the ability to generalize. Ultimately, the balance of the evidence showed that

the social work degree does make a difference in the retention of employees, thus impacting the continuity of service delivery. This was all we needed to keep going.

This Isn’t About Title Protection

Christine: My first day on the job as NASW/CT’s political director was October 17, 2011. In the midst of routine “first day of a new job” sort of things, Steve told me that the board had voted to support the “Social Work Public Access Campaign.” The campaign would be a big part of my work with the chapter. Steve handed me a folder to read what the chapter (he) had done so far. The portfolio contained the chapter’s position paper (a document that included a statement of the campaign’s goal, the rationale as to how the goal served the public good, and a summary of the supporting research), and supporting literature with empirical evidence.

As we embarked on this campaign, we would add materials, such as letters of support. In one of my early conversations with Steve, I made reference to the Campaign as “Title Protection.” Steve quickly corrected me. This campaign was not a “Title Protection” campaign – because the Department of Children and Families (DCF) could easily issue all their social workers new ID badges with the title “case worker” and what really would change? No, this was a *competency* campaign. Our concern was about the quality of service delivery and what we would later dub as “end user” outcomes, meaning we sought to impact the quality of services received by the families and children served by Connecticut state agencies.

A central goal of the Public Access Campaign was to impact all social services, statewide. This meant making a change at a central administrative level, rather than through each administrative office or agency. In Connecticut, the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) manages human resource policies. Specifically, the Personnel Division of DAS has the authority to make the systems changes required to meet our goal of having a fully qualified social work staff serving individuals and families. Lobbying DAS was most certainly an uncommon practice, yet necessary to achieve our change goal.

Like all good CO efforts, attention was not just paid to the decision makers at the top. (Weil & Gamble,

2005). While, as described below, chapter leadership was lobbying DAS, a chapter intern, BSW student Paul Donovan, was organizing social work students from the seven Connecticut social work programs. As the next wave of graduates to be seeking employment in the field, the students were, as Weil and Gamble describe, a functional community with a common interest (p. 130). Paul's efforts to inform and mobilize students paid off in ways that we never could have imagined!

Preference or No Enchilada

Steve: An important strategy decision was whether to advocate that the state hire only social workers or simply give preference to social workers for social work positions. I knew that preference was more feasible, however, Christine and Paul made a strong case for going for the gold. My deference to democracy (it was two against one) lasted until my first meeting with an important state official who told me point blank that you cannot tell a state agency who it can or cannot hire. From that moment it became a campaign for social work preference in hiring.

One of the things that made this campaign unique and successful was our sophisticated use of strategy. So much of what we did was purposeful, with thought to short and long-term consequences. It was like skipping pebbles in water and trying to anticipate the succession and impact of the skips as well as the rings in the water. For example, we knew that the state employee union would oppose the campaign, as some of their members would be negatively impacted if degreed workers were to have more opportunities than others in the state system. Fortunately for us, the state employee unions were focused on arduous labor negotiations with the Governor. This allowed us to conduct a "quiet campaign" of administrative lobbying. A quiet campaign is not, however, a silent campaign. Current and potential NASW members needed to know what we were doing so they could support the effort and find value in their connection to the association. Ironically, some of our members were also union members. Weighing the advantages and disadvantages, we opted to publicize the campaign progress in the chapter newsletter, believing that those with dual union and association memberships would be supportive of the effort and not raise the

issue with the union. We were right. Thus, the decision to use the chapter newsletter to share information about the campaign was an important strategy decision and not something that happened automatically because it was time to publish the newsletter.

Taking the Show on the Road

Steve: A strategy of which I am very proud was our seeking support from non-social work organizations. Because the campaign was about end user outcomes and not social work jobs, it was important to identify stakeholders that were not social workers. Our message would be expected from social workers, but would take on a new meaning when delivered by other interested parties.

To this end, we met individually with representatives from about 15 non-social work organizations that served or advocated for people assisted by state agencies. We asked the agency representatives to sign onto an open letter to the Governor and to write individual letters of support for the State's hiring of professionally prepared social workers. The meetings included Christine the political director, a social work educator, and me, the executive director. This gave us a terrific team. Christine spoke about clinical social work expertise, the faculty member presented the uniqueness of a social work education, and I presented the larger workforce arguments.

In the case of the Connecticut Association of Non-Profits that represents over 500 non-profits I thought NASW/CT should join before we asked for support. They became the eighth organization to sign onto the campaign. We secured support from about two-thirds of the organizations we approached, most agreeing to write to the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) Commissioner on our behalf. We orchestrated the letters to be sent six to eight weeks apart, creating an ongoing reminder of the campaign and the message that we were not going away.

Christine: I think Steve and I made a great road show duo. We played off of one another's strengths very well. After a few meetings we developed a rhythm and had the key talking points down. If Steve usually made one point, but forgot to mention it, I would raise it, and vice versa. I was especially pleased that I could add value to the pitch so early into my affiliation with the chapter. I drew on my practice experience as an

agency program director, having had both social workers and para professionals as direct reports. I added anecdotal evidence that supported our claim that professional social workers are better suited to serve fragile families than are paraprofessionals. I used examples of professional boundaries, ethics, knowing when to seek supervision, and documentation skills.

During our visit with one private nonprofit entity, someone asked about the difference between a master's degree in psychiatric rehabilitation versus a social work degree. Because of my past work in psychiatric rehabilitation, I was able to illustrate that the State positions at issue did not involve psychiatric rehabilitation and therefore would not attract candidates with that degree. Steve told me after that meeting that he was glad I was there to field that question because he would not have known how to answer it. As we took our road show around the state, I was not terribly surprised that people with whom we spoke who were professional social workers tended to endorse our campaign but people from relatively close disciplines, who may have perceived our campaign as a threat, did not.

Raymie: As president I did not attend as many meetings as Steve and Christine. The campaign, after all, was their day job. The meetings I did attend have since blurred into one super meeting. What I do remember is feeling that the meetings had a rhythm of their own, and although I am not usually musically inclined, I was able to join in without missing a beat. My role was to talk about the social work competencies and practice behaviors, field education as our signature pedagogy, social work's use of the strengths perspective, our commitment to cultural competence and utilization of the person-in-environment concept. In other words, I presented the uniqueness of social work education. Speaking at the meetings made me proud to be a social worker. At each meeting I was struck by some unique aspect of our curriculum or values, or the way in which it all comes together to be social work.

Courting the Commissioners

Christine: Our early meetings with DAS were not as successful as we hoped they would be. An initial meeting at DAS that included Dr. Karen Bullock (Chapter President from 2010–2012), Steve and

myself, led me to believe that we had the commissioner on our side. At that meeting Karen set the stage by looking at the commissioner, pointing to the social work series job description, and saying “all we are asking for is the inclusion of *one teeny little word*... ‘preference’”. The commissioner could not help but return Karen's charming smile. At the same meeting the commissioner sheepishly grinned when Steve pointed out that the job description required “knowledge of social work skills and theories...” Steve asked “how are candidates going to possess the skills and knowledge if they didn't go to social work school?” I thought it was a done deal, and did not expect the stonewalling we later experienced from his department.

We also met with representatives from two of the three agencies that provide the most public social work services to residents of Connecticut. The Commissioners of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Department of Social Services (DSS) both understood the social justice aspect of our concern, recognizing that we were not just advocating for our profession. Despite being concerned about the potentially shallow applicant pool, the Commissioners were prepared to make internal changes within their agencies. I remember promising a DSS representative, “We will work with the schools of social work to make sure your applicant pool is flooded with BSW and MSW candidates”.

We were able to respond to all other concerns raised by the commissioners with data. For example, there was the diversity concern, questioning the number of minority graduates. Steve worked with schools of social work to get these data. There was a concern expressed about the applicant pools at the DCF offices in the far corners of the state. We contacted the New York schools that have campuses at the Connecticut border to get the number of Connecticut residents who graduate from their programs to demonstrate that there would be an adequate applicant pool statewide.

Steve: Meeting with commissioners and deputy commissioners was another key component of the campaign. Each meeting was unique and difficult to anticipate. The DSS commissioner, for example, had a slew of staff with him. That meeting was one of our earliest successes, as the commissioner agreed with us and called the DAS commissioner on our behalf. DCF was by far the most interesting as we never met with

the commissioner, rather we had two meetings with two different deputy commissioners. At the first DCF meeting the human resources director said she had a degree in psychology but realized that did not make her qualified as a social worker. I wanted to jump across the table and hug her! As the ultimate change target, I met with DAS representatives most often. One meeting, for example, was with the deputy commissioner, who confirmed that a state agency could make an internal decision to hire only MSWs and BSWs even if the state job specifications allowed other degrees to qualify. Early on, I knew we had a strong likelihood of succeeding within at least one state agency.

Raymie: The fear of a lack of applicants arose at a meeting I attended at DAS with the deputy commissioner. Though I did not know ahead of time that the issue would be raised, it was as though I had been rehearsing all morning. I spoke about the diversity of our social work student body, the maturity of the students in our adult learner program, and of recent conversations with students saying they would be more inclined to apply for positions that explicitly valued their degrees than those that did not. I argued that the State would see an increase in social work applicants if it changed its policy to recognize the social work degree. As the chair of the Social Work Department at my school, I promised to help recruit a qualified, diverse applicant pool for the state positions.

Legislative Role in Regulation

Steve: An important, but perhaps unexpected group that we needed to court were the six state legislators with social work degrees. Though we were seeking a change to state regulations, and not legislation, this group could be very influential to commissioners of state agencies who rely upon the legislature for funding. Two of these legislative meetings were particularly alarming. In one meeting, a legislator was so persuaded by our cause she enthusiastically told her aide to “put it on the legislation list!” This, of course, would have been terrible, as it would have been certain to be unsuccessful and would have made our “quiet” campaign loud. Luckily she became busy with other issues as the session progressed. Another well-meaning legislator strongly urged us to begin with our child protection agency and to work outward from there. This was not the strategy we wanted to pursue. Both were

powerful legislators and we chose not to argue with them, but to quietly keep on our intended path.

Christine: The strategy to reach out to social work legislators reinforced my belief in the importance of relationships. Very early in my tenure at NASW/CT, on behalf of the chapter, I reached out to a legislator with whom the chapter had not worked with in some time. This social work legislator had been an assistant to the DAS commissioner. As a new ally of the Chapter, the legislator shared information about the Commissioner’s reasons for resisting our proposal, and offered to speak to the commissioner on our behalf. I originally had reached out to the legislator because I valued the relationship, not yet knowing he would become such an asset to the campaign.

Getting an Education

Steve: I had expected that the schools of social work would be the easiest group from which to gain support, and was therefore not prepared for the amount of time and energy it took to get all of them to officially sign onto the open letter. The program directors needed to seek approval from their upper administration, which I understood, but when it came time to get them to write the individual letters of support I was surprised how few actually did it initially. In the end, it worked out well as some schools wrote letters early on and others did not, so that later when I needed more letters I was able to go to those who had not yet written.

Raymie: When Steve asked me, as BSW program director and department chair, to sign onto the open letter, I thought “of course... right away!” Lucky for me he made a passing reference to getting approval from above. Apparently the approval procedures at other schools had been slowing the process down more than anticipated. Truthfully it had not occurred to me to seek approval at all. I am lucky that Steve raised the issue, however, as it turned out to be completely necessary that I sought approval. I sent the campaign letter to my Dean, who sent it on to the Provost, who then (much to my surprise) sent it to the CFO for approval... eventually I was permitted to sign onto the campaign. Of course my school’s Counseling Department was unhappy when the Chapter achieved our first success at DCF, creating fewer options for their graduates. Clearly the issue was more complex than I had initially recognized.

The Key Constituency: NASW Members

Steve: The social work community at large was engaged through mobilizing social work students and members. The mobilization effort included speaking to students in social work classes, reaching out to members at chapter events and conferences, and e-mail blasts to the entire membership. We created a separate student petition that contained nearly 500 names. We asked members to write and email the DAS commissioner (not the DCF or DSS commissioners, however, as I did not think they would be receptive to grassroots lobbying). Throughout the campaign I questioned if the grassroots efforts made a meaningful impact on state decision makers, and still do not know, but the contact with members and students sure did give the chapter visibility as working for the profession.

“Would YOU go to a hospital where only 28% of the nurses held degrees in nursing?”

Steve: Two unexpected pieces of news helped shape the next phase of the campaign. In August, 2012, an internal DCF audit revealed that only 28% of the department’s “social workers” had degrees in social work. Nationally, 33% of child welfare workers have a professional social work degree, a statistic I always thought was disgraceful. Upon learning of the 28% statistic, I started asking, “Would you go to a hospital where only 28% of the nurses held degrees in nursing?” The message was clear. The second news item was even more shocking, at least for those of us in New England. The Texas legislature, as it turned out, passed a bill establishing a preference for the BSW and MSW degrees when filling child welfare positions. At a meeting with the DAS commissioner, I said “surely we can do as well as Texas”. He chuckled, neither of us needing to say more.

Christine: The new tagline, “would you want to be treated at a hospital where 70% of the nurses do not have a degree in nursing?” became a battle cry. We had flyers at our statewide annual conference, sent an e-blast to members (with an easy five minute activist opportunity), and brought the message with us everywhere we went.

The key thing to remember about messaging is to know your audience. For the most part the campaign

was about public access to social work services. This meant we deliberately down played the self-serving aspect of this campaign. However, when I spoke to social work students, I played that piece up—“you guys are paying for and *earning* your social work degree. Shouldn’t you get preference in hiring for state social work jobs?” That’s called speaking into your audience’s listening.

Governor Gets the Message: Social Work Matters

Sometimes in the course of campaigns, serendipitous opportunities arise that you never could have orchestrated or even imagined. Such was the case in our Public Access campaign. One spring day, an instructor at the University of Connecticut (UConn) School of Social Work invited Governor Dannel Malloy to speak to her “Political Social Work” class. At the conclusion of his remarks, the Governor took questions from the class. As a result of NASW/CT’s intern’s mobilizing efforts, students at UConn were aware of our campaign. A student asked the Governor about his position on hiring professional social workers for state social work jobs. As was reported to us at NASW/CT, the Governor said something to the effect of “I don’t think you need a social work degree to be a social worker.” The Governor then quickly excused himself from the class without taking any other questions. A student who was in the room at the time later reported that both the students and their instructor were dumbfounded by the Governor’s remarks. Did the Governor forget to whom he was speaking? The Governor’s words, however, traveled quickly.

Christine: The next day at the chapter office, the phone lines lit up. Social workers from all corners of the state were calling in, “Did you hear what the Governor said at UConn?” Connecticut social workers were mad and ready to take action. They wanted to know how NASW/CT would respond. I was almost giddy at this chain of events. As community organizers, we could not have dreamed of such a gift landing in our laps. Steve and I quickly strategized how we could capitalize on this wave of enthusiasm. We decided to launch an impromptu phone campaign. Subsequent callers were directed to “call the Governor and promote the value of the social work degree.”

About a month later, Governor Malloy was speaking to BSW and MSW students from Southern

Connecticut State University for their annual Lobby Day at the state capitol. This event had been arranged months prior to the UConn class visit, and again, serendipitously just happened to be scheduled four weeks after the Governor's now infamous appearance at UConn. At this event the Governor seemed to remember who his audience was, and even referenced that he had received phone calls from social workers about the Public Access campaign. Although conciliatory in demeanor, the Governor stopped short of supporting our position.

As I reflect upon this series of events in the campaign, I am struck by what sometimes appears to be serendipitous, may simply be the result of sound planning and solid execution. If it were not for identifying social work students as key stakeholders and tasking our student intern with the job of educating and organizing them, would that student at UConn have asked the Governor his position on state social work jobs? That one question after all, set a much larger mobilization effort into action.

Three Times a Charm: Malloy and Social Work

Steve: We collected over 500 student signatures on the petition, had many signors on our open letter, and had approached just about all likely supporters. I knew it was time to present our case to the Governor.

We invited Cokey Connocanon, an MSW student and DCF foster mother to attend our meeting with the Governor. In addition to our usual pitches, Cokey spoke eloquently about her experiences in dealing with degreed and non-degreed workers at DCF and how those experiences served as a catalyst for her to pursue her MSW. Cokey added the lived experience that focused the discussion on the quality of care, and public access to qualified social workers, rather than jobs for our constituents.

Steve: When we first met with Governor Malloy I was most struck that he did not have any staff in the room with him. I was not sure if this was a good sign, but clearly we had his undivided attention. In the meeting I presented him with our open letter and our student petition. I felt that our presentation went well, that the Governor was listening to us, and that he was receptive to our ideas.

Christine: When Steve told me he had secured a face to face meeting with the Governor to discuss our public access campaign I was thrilled on one hand. Wow! Face time with the Governor to make our pitch; but on the other hand, the announcement caused me some anxiety. Could I use my past association with the Governor to our advantage?

Governor Malloy and I are from the same hometown. Prior to being elected Governor, Dannel Malloy was mayor of our city at a time when I was a community practitioner in town. Over the course of his tenure as mayor, I had several occasions to interface with him in my capacity as an agency program director. On top of that, my father had been the Governor's high school history teacher, facts I made a point of mentioning when I was interviewing for the Political Director position. Now I was a bit nervous, "ok, so I 'know' the Governor. How can I work this angle to champion the public access campaign?"

The morning of our meeting with the Governor at the state capitol, Raymie, Steve, Cokey, and myself were in the receiving area, waiting to be called in. I think we were all a little nervous. A private meeting with the Governor was a big deal. What I once spoke so confidently about in my interview, I found myself downplaying as we stood there. "Well, it's been a couple a years since the Governor and I crossed paths. With everything he's concerned with as Governor, I'm not sure he'll make the connection that he's worked with me in the past."

The door to his office opened and we were invited in. There stood Governor Malloy all by himself, no handlers. He shook our hands one by one. When he came to me I smiled and said, "Hello Governor, nice to see you again." Once we were all seated, the Governor turned to me and said, "How are your folks? Are they in Florida for the winter?" YES! The hometown connection breaks the ice! I remember being so excited that this little exchange happened in front of my boss and the chapter president (*see, I told you I knew the governor*). I immediately relaxed and fell into road show mode. Raymie, Steve, Cokey, and I made a strong case for how hiring professional social workers for state social work jobs would ultimately benefit the state of Connecticut. I remember leaving the meeting feeling pretty good.

Raymie: When Steve told me he secured a meeting

with the Governor for April 4, I was filled with excitement. My University was exhibiting at the Capitol that same day for a program related to my department and I thought the coincidence was a good sign. It felt like destiny when I received an e-mail from my son's school that he and some other students would be representing the school at the State Capitol on April 4 for Invention Convention Day at the Capitol. It is not often that I have to juggle three co-occurring events at the Capitol, one of them being a meeting with the Governor!

The day itself was full of emotion. I felt like my brain was split, each side working at full power. There was the mom side, making sure that my son had his invention (a device you attach to your shoe that sounds an alarm if you are within tripping distance of an object), was properly dressed in his suit, had his lunch, was in the right place at the right time, etc. Then there was the president of NASW/CT side of the brain, making sure that I had my notes, was properly dressed in a suit, had water and Xanax, was in the right place at the right time, etc.

Luckily our road show team met prior to the meeting with the Governor to prepare. We agreed who would make which points, though in hindsight, I think this would have fallen into place anyway. Who else would have spoken about social work education? We discussed who would open... well, this was a good idea... no dead silence and no jumping all over each other. Lastly, we calmed each other. Or at least they calmed me. This also was a good idea.

The meeting itself went as planned. The before meeting banter was friendly. The Governor remembered Christine and her family, he remembered Steve's father's hardware store also located in the same town, and he said he'd met my son earlier that day. He expressed interest in our issue, and listened carefully as Cokey discussed being a foster parent and a student. Though he made no promises, he was attentive and courteous. I suspect Steve took special pleasure in handing the Governor the open letter, as all the previous campaign efforts appeared to be focused upon gaining signors. This was the culmination of that effort. We left the meeting knowing we had done our best and used our time well.

DCF Commissioner Says "Steve Karp Wins"

Steve: The first big breakthrough, and indeed the biggest success in many ways, was getting DCF to agree to only hire MSWs and BSWs. This proclamation went beyond my request for preference, it was the whole enchilada! Each time we added a new non-social worker organization as a supporter I would email deputy commissioner, Libby Graham, with a subject line such as "good news" and would announce the new supporter and why they signed onto the campaign. At one point I received a reply saying "I appreciate hearing from you again.... I admire your diligence in promoting preferential consideration for BSWs and MSWs..." I think I read that letter more than half a dozen times, searching for a hidden message.

The tipping point came when the DCF commissioner sent a letter to the Appropriations Committee co-chairs asking for suggestions for the legislative session. A clerk told us about the letter and we recommended that the co-chairs write back with only one suggestion: hire MSWs and BSWs. Three weeks later a legislative aide called me to say that going forward DCF was only hiring persons with social work degrees. I was elated! I celebrated with staff and brought home a bottle of wine to continue the celebration.

Once we had DCF on board I wrote to the DSS commissioner and asked that he follow suit. His response was to agree to give preference to candidates with social work degrees. Since then DSS job postings state "MSW degree strongly preferred." It felt great the first time I saw that in writing.

The final step was to get DAS to agree to institutionalize preference into the job specifications impacting all of the state agencies. I was acutely aware that our successes with DCF and DSS were based upon decisions by the respective commissioners. A new commissioner could undo the internal policy decisions of a previous commissioner. If, however, we could get DAS to put preference in place, we would have created a systems change that would be highly unlikely to be reversed.

Raymie: The DCF call from Steve was the first of a series of what I call the "OMG Phone Calls". Steve called to tell me about the DCF success and was

clearly happy beyond measure. My response, of course, was a loud “Oh my God!” If the campaign ended here, we were successful. I thought back to the initial board meeting and realized just how far we had come. Interestingly, Steve had never met with the DCF commissioner face to face prior to the decision.

A couple of months after the decision was formalized, Steve and I heard the DCF commissioner speak for a Social Work Month Celebration. Prior to her remarks Steve introduced himself, thus the two finally met, after hearing so much about each other.

Soon after the DCF call came the DSS OMG call, then came some OMG calls around other chapter issues... We were on a roll...

DAS Meetings: The Good, the Bad, the Ugly

Steve: After the initial bursts from the DCF and DSS successes, the campaign hit a DAS roadblock. The only target left was DAS, and my history with DAS on this issue was not positive. DAS had for years refused to budge on the hiring issue, putting up a range of arguments, such as not having enough social workers of color; the unions having to agree; and concerns related to how it may impact on current employees. We answered each of their concerns, in my opinion satisfactorily, and it seemed that we were making progress. After several meetings we were told they would be back in touch “soon.” Apparently my definition of soon is not the same as theirs, as months passed with no response.

To break the silence, I decided to send a letter with signatures from social workers attending our statewide conference calling on DAS to add preference to the social worker job classification. That brought a response, an email on December 23 stating that we had changed our position and were now asking for more, thus DAS had to approach every regional office of each affected agency to determine if preference would cause a problem. I could not believe it and had no idea what position we had changed. I also could not get an answer on December 24! So I spent the next couple of weeks wondering what I had done wrong. Perhaps I had used some terminology incorrectly, leading DAS to decide we had changed our position?

Christine: After DCF and DSS were both on board, DAS continued to stall. I felt we were getting the run around, and I could not figure out why they were hesitating. Were they really that afraid of backlash from the unions? That whole back and forth with Steve leaving voicemail messages that went unanswered was frustrating to observe. I think it was only after Steve raised the campaign with the commissioner’s wife (who was a social worker) when speaking with her about an unrelated issue, that we finally got a call back.

It turned out that Dr. Libby, the State Personnel Manager of Human Resources, was concerned about the legality of adding the word preference. Steve found a social work job description for the Department of Corrections that had the word preference already in the language, showing that precedent had been set.

Steve: During the whole “change of position debacle” I began to fear that I had blown two and a half years of work and was reluctant to share that concern with my chapter leadership. Concern turned to anger, however, and I shared my feelings of dissatisfaction with the state’s Health Care Advocate who simply said go to the Lieutenant Governor, “that’s what I do when I cannot get DAS to act.” I guess you can say the rest is history.

Lt Gov Delivers the Goods

Raymie: When the Malloy administration first took office, the Lieutenant Governor had reached out to the chapter and initiated a meeting with Steve and me in the chapter office. It was an informal opportunity to introduce the Chapter and the work we do. I was glad to have been at that meeting, as it made meeting her a second time, in the more formal setting of her office at the State Capitol less intimidating. Like her boss, the Lieutenant Governor was engaged and charismatic. I was sure we had an “in” when she revealed that her own daughter was a master’s prepared social worker. While Steve explained our successes with DCF and DSS, and our challenge with reaching DAS, I couldn’t help but notice the historical paintings of the revolutionary war that decorated her office walls. It was a grand, stately office with a high cathedral ceiling and rich oak furniture. Steve chatted on about the lack of permanence of our current achievements, while I was thinking, “I could never work in this office, surrounded by scenes of violence and such dark

heavy furniture!” It was OK, I had done my part earlier, and Steve was just bringing it home with the “ask”. I wrapped up the conversation by asking more about her daughter, and as usual, we left the meeting feeling good. I never told Steve my thoughts about the office. I think he thought I was attentive the whole time.

The Snow Delayed Monday.... The Return to DAS

Steve: Within two weeks of the meeting with the Lieutenant Governor, DAS called asking to meet. Actually, I was never so nervous about a meeting. I was sure they were not calling me to say let’s meet to say “no” in-person. That would be an email or letter. Still, I had trouble sleeping the night before. That morning it had snowed and Raymie was unable to make the meeting. I went alone and it was a celebratory moment that I wished Raymie and Chris could have been at with me. DAS agreed to the preference effective immediately. The commissioner came by and I told him that his volume of correspondence would now decrease significantly. He laughed and congratulated me on a job well done.

Raymie: It was the last OMG phone call, though the news was anything but surprising. Steve was uncharacteristically nervous about the meeting, when both the purpose and outcome were so plainly obvious. I felt terrible that I could not be there with him, but the snow had caused a school delay for my son. When Steve called after the meeting to say we had won, there was not enough to say... We had done it! Steve had done the lion’s share of the strategy and the leg work, but I knew I had been there for some of it too, contributing wherever I could.

Honoring Our Word

Christine: I left my position as the chapter’s political director four days shy of Steve’s final meeting at DAS to take a social work teaching position. Once settled at the University, it was important to me, from an integrity standpoint, to make good on the promise we had made to DCF and DSS to “flood their applicant lists with qualified candidates”. I therefore organized a workshop at the school on how to apply for state social work jobs for our MSW and

BSW candidates. Representatives from DAS’ Human Resource department conducted the workshop and reported to me that they would be happy to engage in repeat performances as needed.

Final Reflections

Christine: They say luck is the intersection of preparedness and timing, and I think that was at play here. Two events put this campaign near the end zone. The first was when the senate chair of the Appropriations committee, Senator Harp, told Steve that DCF’s Commissioner wanted to know what the Senator’s priorities were for the Department. Because of the work we had already done with the Appropriation chairs Senator Harp was knowledgeable of our campaign and put it at the top of her list. The other example was meeting Lt. Governor Nancy Wyman and the phone call she made to DAS. That is what finally got DAS to agree to “preference”.

In the end, I think it was wise of us not to settle for internal policy decisions at DSS and DCF. As Steve noted, commissioners come and go, and so do their internal policies. It was, therefore, crucial to get preference codified with DAS. For me, that was the most frustrating part of the campaign because that’s where we experienced the most resistance. I think it was smart to get the endorsement of non social work groups and other stakeholders, showing it wasn’t just social workers caring about social work jobs. Throughout, we stayed true to our ethical principles, always keeping the end user, vulnerable families, central to our discussions.

What resonated with me most, was how we took page after page out of a community organizer’s playbook and applied those CO principles and strategies and tactics in every phase of this campaign to achieve our goal. Even though the final touchdown occurred after I left the chapter, I was happy and proud when Steve sent me a copy of the letter from DAS saying that they endorsed preference for social work positions across departments.

Raymie: I will always be proud to have been a part of this Public Access campaign. It is especially meaningful to me, as someone who teaches macro practice, that we used good macro social work practice theory, skills and knowledge to increase access to clinical social work services. For me, this is a perfect example of how and why we are one profession

requiring the range of skills and tools that make up social work. Ultimately the goal was to help more people benefit from clinical social work services. However, true to our values, our efforts were focused on serving some of the more vulnerable residents of our state.

Personally, my affiliation with NASW/CT has been long and meaningful and to know that this change, among others, occurred during my presidency is an honor. I only did what any reasonable president would do. I trusted the talents and wisdom of my esteemed executive director colleague, supporting him as needed. I did my best to be as accessible and present as possible, without putting my own job or family at risk. I saw my role as supporter, confidant, critic, friend, colleague and humorist.

I believe that Connecticut is a better place because of the work that we did. I believe that as the workforce professionalizes, continuity of care for some of Connecticut's most vulnerable residents will improve. I believe that social workers will also benefit, both because their degree will be recognized and because the public will be seeing real social workers performing in social work roles. This will help our public image. I look forward to the days to come.

Steve: Prior to this campaign if you had asked me what I was most proud of in my time with NASW/CT I would have said passage of the social work confidentiality statute. But this campaign exceeded that accomplishment by giving individuals and families served by public sector social service agencies the same qualified professionals as clients in the private sector. I am most proud of that fact.

The campaign challenged me to think strategically on multiple levels. I used every skill set I have learned as a macro social work practitioner and community organizer. I never doubted that we were on the right track, but there sure were sleepless nights throughout the process. I felt the high of

“winning” with DCF and the disappointment of having organizations that I greatly respected decline to support us.

I am indebted to the chapter's leadership for allowing me to take on this campaign and for supporting our work. To the best of my knowledge we are one of only half a dozen states that are hiring qualified BSWs and MSWs for child welfare social work. Of those states we are the first one to accomplish this by persuading the executive branch, rather than using licensing statutes or other statutory language. It still gives me a thrill every time I think about it.

For nearly 25 years I sought to have equality in the competence of public sector social workers with those in the private sector. I kept my eye on the prize, some years working toward this goal, when an opportunity seemed to present itself, and other years busying myself with other important projects. In conclusion, I can only say I am one persistent little bugger!

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