

## ADVOCACY OR UNETHICAL PRACTICE

### "On Do The Right Thing"

*Social workers behavior and actions are guided by a Code of Ethics. We are not lone rangers or vigilantes on a crusade to right the perceived wrongs inflicted by impersonal bureaucracies. We are employed in host settings and are taught how to bring about change in individuals, groups, organizations and communities. We place ourselves, our clients, and our profession at risk when we violate rules and regulations, and undermine authority.*

By Sheldon R. Gelman

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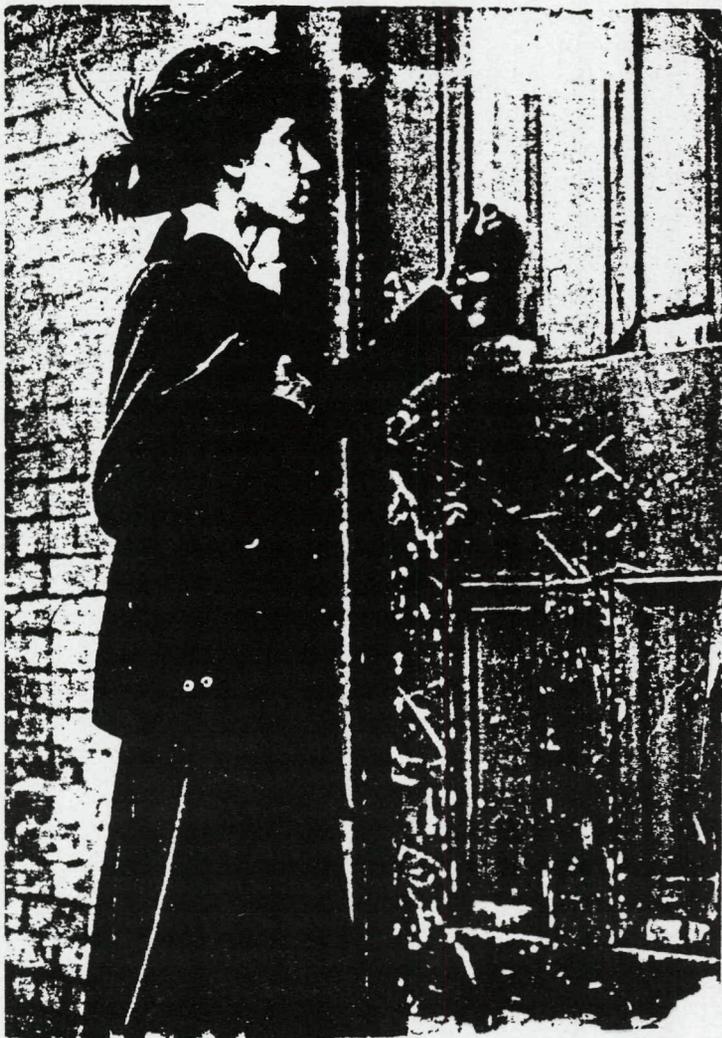
My reaction to the article, "Do the Right Thing" by Annie L. Houston, as a reviewer was so intense that in addition to writing my review I expressed my concerns to the editor. The decision of the Executive Board of Reflections to publish it with responses by educators should serve as both a teaching exercise and as a means of stimulating critical practice analysis.

Social workers are professionals whose behavior and actions are guided by a Code of Ethics. We are not lone rangers or vigilantes on a crusade to right the perceived wrongs inflicted by impersonal bureaucracies. We are employed in host settings and are taught how to bring about change in individuals, groups, organizations and communities. We place ourselves, our clients, and our profession at risk when we violate rules and regulations, and undermine authority.

Being a change agent and advocate involves both responsibilities and consequences. Advocacy is a means to an end, not an end in itself. To be a successful advocate, one must understand both the role and the environment in which one functions. While the client's wants and needs are critical to the process, not all clients' needs are legitimate nor are they necessarily appropriate or attainable. Respect for the worth and dignity of clients extends to our colleagues and employers as well as our clients.

In addition to the concerns stated above, I felt that the author, by submitting for publication a paper in which she chronicled her behaviors, was ethically vulnerable herself, and jeopardized both her university and their ability to utilize this facility as a field placement site in the future. It was also troubling to me that she appeared to function without supervision and that her faculty advisor had not raised these issues with her.

It has long been recognized that the



criminal justice system is faced with the often conflicting objectives of protecting society and rehabilitating the offender. The author would have been well served to have reviewed the goals and objectives relating to correctional policy before writing off the system and identifying so strongly with her client's wants and circumstances. Given my background in corrections, this particular program and setting appears to have provided an enlightened, if not innovative, approach to dealing with convicted female offenders who are pregnant and/or have very young children. The setting provided opportunities in which appropriate interventions could have brought about positive change in clients as well as broader systemic innovation.

The practice of social work in such settings is difficult at best, and requires a delicate balancing of roles. It is unfortunate that the student appeared to dismiss the learning opportunities and resources of program and facility staff. Her actions mirrored those of the one not engaged in professional education. The system's failure to act appropriately in enforcing policies does not provide license for a social work professional to engage in rule violation.

While the Code of Ethics teaches us that our primary responsibility is to our clients and that the worker is to make every effort to foster maximum self-determination on the part of clients, the Code also requires the worker to treat colleagues with respect, courtesy, and fairness, and to adhere to commitments made to the employing organization.

In this particular situation it could be argued that the worker had obligations to multiple systems which includes the prison system, the community at large, as well as clients. Pursuing the interests of one set of clients over the interests of others without fully comprehending the competing interests is incorrect.

Social workers should maintain high standards of personal conduct, should act in accordance with the highest standard of professional integrity and should not participate in, condone, or be associated with dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation. Violation of these ethical principles are grounds for dismissal in every social work education program in the nation.

The author's misguided belief that somehow she was righting a wrong or assisting her clients in becoming self-determining or independent is inadequate justification for engaging in unprofessional and potentially dangerous behavior. This is not, unfortunately, a women's issue, or an issue of power, it is an issue of proper practice and ethical behavior. Unfortunately, even after reflecting on the ethical issues involved, the author fails to identify with the principles of the Code of Ethics in assessing her practice. To write about practice without understanding the core issues involved is both frightening and sad. □

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