

Reflections on CalSWEC as a Catalyst for Change

The author summarizes a twenty-year career inspired, to an extent, by early contributors to CalSWEC.

by
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I am looking at the letter on CalSWEC stationery soliciting papers for this special issue of Reflections, and the words "focusing on public social services" and "a partnership for change" leap out at me. These phrases represent, for me, the vision of Harry Specht and the intent of those of us fortunate enough to be associated with CalSWEC at some time during the last 10 years.

I live in North Carolina now, about 20 miles from the Durham County Department of Social Services, where I first began my public child welfare career more than 20 years ago. That first work experience left me with a lasting commitment to public social services that has framed my social work career. Visiting with my first client on an unpaved street within the city limits, I realized that I had the privilege and the responsibility of working with the city's most troubled and vulnerable people who were virtually unknown to other citizens living on the paved streets around the corner. I do not romanticize the experience. Working in public social services has been one of the most difficult professional challenges I have ever experienced. And yet that environment, which demanded my best practice skills, also rewarded me with moments of success and a strong connection to the history and values of social

work.

And so I resonated with Harry's vision to develop an educational program that would introduce to students the passion and challenge of public social services and provide to agencies, families, and children the best educated and most skilled social work practitioners that they deserved.

As the second CalSWEC Director, I was fortunate to reap the benefits of Bart Grossman's hard work implementing the program and ironing out all the rough start-up edges. I was able to focus, instead, on moving CalSWEC forward as "a partnership for change." The list of partners in this change effort is impressive—universities, county and state agencies, associations and foundations. I realize now that the partnership should also include families. We ask families to change and yet fail to include them among the change agents.

Because of our commitment to change, CalSWEC was more than a stipend program. California graduate schools of social work were among the first in the country to add and adapt curriculum to support public child welfare practice. Social work deans and directors struggled with the challenges of making graduate social work education accessible to distant corners of the state and through new technologies, while protecting the

character and unique contributions of each of their programs. I remember vividly my first CalSWEC Board meeting and the lively discussion that ensued there, touching on issues of territoriality, educational philosophy, and funding practicalities.

Directors of state and county agencies struggled with their own challenges to change. Agencies welcomed research on child welfare issues and problems but winced when the research results pointed to needed changes in services. Agency managers competed for specially trained social work interns but had difficulty providing agency field supervisors with the job flexibility necessary for them to adequately supervise the interns. Child welfare graduates found that county personnel practices often worked against their smooth transitions into jobs. Also discouraging were the poor working conditions, high caseload pressures, and bureaucratic layers that blunted the eagerness of these highly skilled and trained graduate social workers.

As more and more CalSWEC graduates find and keep public child welfare positions, however, the climate for change grows more and more encouraging throughout California agencies. And those of us starting similar programs in other states are heartened by your continued success.

I am proud to have benefited from Harry Specht's vision and the hard work of all the partners for change at CalSWEC. Because of my good fortune to have worked with you all, I have returned to the place where I be-

gan and I know it for the first time. Thank you.

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About the Author

Nancy S. Dickinson, M.S.S.W., Ph.D., is Executive Director of the Jordan Institute for Families at the School of Social Work, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The Institute focuses on strengthening families through research and educational and technical assistance projects. Prior to assuming this role in August 1998, Dickinson was Executive Director of the California Social Work Education Center located at the University of California at Berkeley School of Social Welfare, which is the largest university-agency partnership in the nation, focusing on reprofessionalizing public child welfare. Dr. Dickinson has had extensive experience in social services practice, administration, research, education, and training in North Carolina, Tennessee, California, and Washington State. She received her MSSW at the University of Tennessee and her Ph.D. at the University of Washington.



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