

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND NASW

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The Executive Director of the California Chapter of National Association of Social Work recounts the efforts that he, NASW, and the membership have undertaken to promote social justice.

Over the 15 years that I have been the Executive Director of the California Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), I've learned that there are many expectations for a professional social work organization, but the charge for social justice is one of the most difficult to understand. Social workers are idealistic and believe strongly in societal change, yet such change is slow and incremental. On a daily basis, NASW is guided by the quest for social justice, but it takes a long view to fully realize it. NASW is guided by the *Code of Ethics* (NASW 2008) and public and social policy statements written by social workers and approved by a nationally elected assembly of social worker delegates known as the Delegate Assembly. These statements are published in a volume entitled *Social Work Speaks* (NASW 2009). In contrast to other helping professions, what distinguishes social work is its strong ethical and theoretical base for social justice. However, while individual social workers have long been advocates for human services, there are few in the political and social policy arena (Midgely, 1997).

Social Justice and Ethics

The *NASW Code of Ethics* effectively ties ethical behavior and practice to social justice. Of the six ethical values in the *Code*, one is devoted to social justice and the ethical principal that "social workers challenge social injustice." In support of this ethical value, one of the six elaborative sections in the *Code* is devoted to the "Social Worker's Ethical

Responsibilities to the Broader Society." NASW uses this section as a guide to its efforts in social justice (NASW 2008).

Section 6.01: "Social Welfare," lays out the framework for NASW's advocacy for welfare, medical assistance, social and mental health services, economic development, housing, etc. Hence, NASW's advocacy program supports legislation and policies at the local, state, federal and global level that provides assistance to people and their communities usually through governmental and non-governmental organizational entities.

Section 6.02: "Public Participation," promotes social worker involvement in "shaping social policies and institutions." NASW members and staff contribute to the policy discussion at county boards of supervisors meetings, in state level policy hearings and forums, and in Congress or national policy discussions. NASW members and staff also participate in international conferences and forums to promote ethical public and social policies.

Section 6.03: "Public Emergencies," has been NASW's guide throughout the decade whether it was 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Haiti earthquake, or the Gulf oil disaster. Often social workers are among the first to volunteer and work closely with disaster relief agencies and coordinating bodies. NASW cooperates regularly with other disaster relief organizations, such as the Red Cross, to train and prepare social workers for volunteer work during disasters.

Section 6.04: "Social and Political Action," guides NASW's work in promoting economic equality, non-discrimination, and cultural competency for practitioners. NASW has long provided leadership, policy and financial support for efforts to fight discrimination and to promote equal rights. NASW opposed the unconstitutional Proposition 187 which would have, among other things, barred education for immigrant children. NASW has consistently opposed anti-gay measures including most recently Proposition 8, which bans gay marriage in California. NASW has joined with other groups opposed to measures that would limit a woman's right to choose, and set up barriers to children receiving mental health treatment without parental consent. NASW's political program (CalPACE and other components) is the only social work oriented, comprehensive political action program at the state level. Our annual Lobby Days Program is the largest in the country, bringing over 1,000 social workers to the state capitol and lobbying nearly all of the legislative offices, as well as the governor's office.

Two Methods

When discussing NASW and social justice, a question often arises as to what should be the main method used in working towards social justice. While the methods discussed can vary greatly, they could be broadly categorized into two methods. The methods are community organization and "influence through lobbying." Traditionally, NASW has taken the "influence through lobbying" path while encouraging its leaders and members to organize communities. How NASW decides on which method to use is based on strategic directions set by its democratically elected leadership (national and state boards of directors and Delegate Assembly). There are other NASW activities that move the organization towards its goals of social justice but are less well known, including political action and professional development.

Influence Through Lobbying

The most visible method NASW uses in working toward social justice is its advocacy agenda, which utilizes the "influence through

lobbying" method. In Washington D.C. and Sacramento, NASW leaders, staff, and lobbyists visibly lobby for programs, services, civil rights, and policies that promote help for those in need. It is a daunting task given severe budget constraints and a continuous counter effort that calls for no taxes, small government, and individual self help over societal help for individuals. Important policy and legislative efforts that NASW collaborates on include:

- expansion of in-home and community support services;
- expansion of medical coverage for children and families;
- supportive services for recipients in welfare reform;
- funding and redirection of the mental health system to focus on recovery and rehabilitation;
- early childhood education and development;
- corrections reform;
- support for foster youth;
- civil rights for oppressed and disenfranchised groups
- national healthcare reform efforts
- immigration reform.

NASW teams with major advocacy groups such as labor, consumer groups, county government and other professional associations. NASW is selective and only joins efforts where professional social work policies are in agreement with the goals of the other groups. As a collaborative member of these efforts, NASW joins in lobbying efforts with other lobbyists, urges action by its members and non-member social workers through legislative alerts and communicates its policies and positions through the media.

Political Action

A related but less known effort is NASW's political program, or CalPACE (California Political Action for Candidate Election). NASW doesn't have a large political action fund, so its influence is not led by political action committee contributions to candidates. NASW's political goals are to elect more social workers and social work friendly candidates, and to encourage grassroots efforts such as getting out the vote. Through NASW's

CalPACE program, NASW works continuously to inform and involve social workers in the political process. NASW promotes to the political system that social workers make good candidates for election, and educates those social workers who are candidates that billing oneself as a social worker is not a political liability.

NASW's CalPACE actively engages in raising political action money from social workers. Money plays an important role in opening doors to policy makers and getting their attention, as evidenced by the influence that labor and county government associations wield. Contrary to popular opinion, campaign contributions to politicians are not for the purpose of their enrichment. It is for the purpose of electing and reelecting them to office. Communicating to the voters requires substantial resources as California is the most populous state and state legislators represent 500,000 to 1 million persons in their districts.

It is important to view political action as directly related to the pursuit of social justice. Many important policy changes and reforms are accomplished by the slimmest of legislative vote margins, such as healthcare reform. Adoption of the state budget comes down to 3 votes in each house. Who will represent us in the legislature often is decided by a few percentage points in primary elections. NASW is engaged in continuous

efforts through education with social workers to destigmatize political involvement. By electing social workers and social work friendly candidates to office, we improve our chances of enacting policy changes that work towards achieving social justice.

Social Justice and Professional Development

Social justice is very much related to professional development in that social workers need the skills, knowledge and tools typically used in this area including grassroots and/or community organizing, and social policy courses. However, the link between social justice and professional development is sometimes not as clear as it is with advocacy and political action. There hasn't been much demand among social workers for formal training in this area, as evidenced by the few social justice conferences, forums, and workshops that are available. There seems to be few jobs in this area compared to clinical and direct service jobs. Nevertheless, professional development does present an opportunity for social workers to reconnect to the important social work ethical values of social justice. One of the key continuing educational requirements for license renewal is a mandatory law and ethics course (six hours) every two years. While these courses typically focus on such issues as confidentiality, mandatory reporting, and client consent, those offered by NASW also include a section on the *NASW Code of Ethics* in which social justice is covered.

At the national level, NASW has developed cultural competency standards for practitioners. A key element of cultural competency is for social workers to understand the individuals, families, and communities they work with from the standpoint of oppression and discrimination. Professional development involves individual social workers understanding "their own boundaries of moral exclusion and developing a stance of inclusion, in which all people are entitled to the same values, rules, and considerations of fairness" (Van Soest, 2003).



NASW established the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW) credential in 1960. The ACSW was the first—and for many years, the only—nationally known and recognized credential of the profession. Before individual states could license social workers, the ACSW was the only source in most states of acknowledging and, through NASW's professional review program, regulating the social work profession. One of the credentialing requirements is that all ACSWs have taken and continue to take ethical coursework, which would include social justice by way of the teaching on the NASW Code of Ethics.

Summary

Critics have often argued that NASW has done little to promote social justice, and that its efforts are feeble and ineffectual. They ask the question, "In the long run, what has NASW really done?" Since social work's modern historic roots in the 19th century, social work's voice has been one in a chorus rather than as a soloist. It is not the culture of social work to focus on the practitioner, but rather on the client, the community, and society. It is little wonder that, since social work promotes a spending, governmental solution to society's ills, that policy makers often relegate its voice to a stereotyped category that is criticized in some quarters as "liberal" or "bleeding heart." Nevertheless when economic and governmental budget conditions are optimal, NASW has been on the team of advocates able to achieve important objectives in social welfare, such as expansion of medical coverage for all poor children, improving wage conditions for in-home supportive services workers, and expansion of social workers in child and adult protective services. NASW has been a leading voice on anti-discrimination efforts ranging from fighting for marriage equality to condemning nations considering severe punishment for homosexual activities.

Could this have been done without NASW's presence? In today's world of collaborative alliances, it would be hard to say if the success of a collaborative effort would have been affected either way if one member of the collaborative was present or not.

Sometimes, in the social justice world, there is a tendency to look for a savior or a champion and to ascribe phenomenal power to that individual or organization.

NASW serves as a vehicle for social workers to fight for social justice in the arenas that are covered in this article. Many social workers have used this vehicle to advance their social justice agenda. Whether the issue is small or large, NASW is the professional social work organization by which social workers can bring their voices to the forefront.

References

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