

National Association of Social Workers Foundation
2nd Annual Social Work Month Gala
Honoring Our Nation's Child Welfare Social Workers
Washington, D.C.
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Thank you very much. I am truly honored by the invitation to share this important evening with all of you.

Let me begin by congratulating you on this grand event and, even more importantly, on the NASW Foundation's continuing commitment to the social work field and to work that is among the most admirable and important endeavors that a man or woman can choose to do. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is proud to be – even in a small way – associated with that commitment.

Tonight, I want to speak above all else about our shared need to convey – to a far larger American audience – a fuller appreciation of the critical importance of the profession, the people, and the work you all so passionately represent.

There may have been a day, a time, an era when social work was widely understood, deeply appreciated and highly valued by the American public and by its opinion and policy leaders, but that time is most certainly not now.

Oh, to be sure, lots of ordinary folks express admiration – even if sometimes a bewildered admiration – about the good intentions, the kind heartedness, the caring motivations that they associate with social workers – “those people willing to help needy folks with complicated needs.” And many politicians, given the right occasion, are willing to inflate their rhetoric almost recklessly. They sometimes talk about how “inspiring” and “honorable” that this work is; and how “selfless” and “noble” are the men and women who do it.

But even this appreciative impression of social work frequently coexists in the public's mind with an increasing tendency to see social workers as essentially bureaucrats – men and women who are employed to apply government rules or agency procedures to the lives of children and adults with hard-to-describe and hard-to-fix problems. Also attached to this impression is an inclination to see social workers as folks who might lack the drive, entrepreneurial impulse or ambition to thrive in more competitive, higher paid professional tracks. Forgive me for saying it, but I think it's not too far from the truth to say that a significant fraction of the general public in this country, when all is said and done, think of social workers as akin to postal workers – only nicer, more patient, and with less concrete tasks to perform.

Troubling as this stereotype might strike some of us, it's really not the most important thing to worry about. Even more troubling than what the country thinks of social work, is how stunningly little they know about social work . . . about profession, this field.

A year and a half ago, the Casey Foundation set out on what seemed a modest, exploratory project. We set out to review the basic data and the research literature on the state of the front line of the human services workforce. We wanted to know how many folks – approximately – were doing child protection and child welfare work in the United States. We wanted to know how many people were engaged in juvenile justice and youth services work. We wanted to know how many were engaged in welfare to work counseling and how many people were doing child care and child development.

For each of these sectors, we wanted to get approximate, preliminary answers to some simple questions. What were workers' typical educational preparation and credentials? What was the average salary range? What was the typical tenure and career path for workers? How would one characterize typical caseloads or workloads in each sector? What was known about the state of and trends in worker satisfaction and worker perception of effectiveness?

What we discovered in this initial inquiry was truly stunning. We discovered that you simply could not find answers – even crude answers – to any one of these core questions.

The fact is there is no remotely relevant data bases available that shed any real light on any of these fundamental questions; nor is there a research literature that comes anywhere near illuminating the qualitative state of the human services workforce.

Put plainly, the social work frontline – the human services frontline – in America – which Casey, through its own research, now estimates to be about 2.5 to 3 million workers – this workforce may be America's largest distinct workforce about which virtually nothing is known. We have, for example, far, far better data on the size, state, status, pay, productivity and distribution of the migrant agricultural workforce than we do of the child welfare, juvenile services or child care workforce.

Now, I submit to you that the consequences of this ignorance are enormous. This lack of accessible information has huge implications for the present and future of the social work profession and social work professionals. It also has huge consequences for the efficiency and effectiveness of the child welfare system, the juvenile justice system, the child care and development systems as well as for evaluating the return on the vast public investment represented in those systems. Most important, the public ignorance surrounding this work and the people who do it has unmeasurably important implications for the vulnerable children and families, for the troubled teens and at risk youth, and for the developing children, whose very lives depend on the quality of this workforce.

In my own opinion, the most serious consequence of public ignorance about this work and this workforce is that the public – especially the media and politicians – have no real grasp whatever of how difficult this work is; how dangerous and stressful much of it can be; and how much impact it has on tens of thousands of human lives everyday.

Ladies and gentlemen, the American public pays rapt attention to the media's coverage of the death of a neglected child who was known to a child welfare agency. Viewers can recount in detail what went wrong in any one of these well covered tragedies. But I daresay, those same

viewers or TV reporters or the governor in the affected state – I daresay that none of them could describe the daily demands routinely experienced by the child welfare social workers who are employed – whose job it is – to quickly assess – often in hostile contexts – the complicated dynamics of a troubled family; to evaluate, in that context, the level of present and future threats to children living there; to identify the most appropriate way of mitigating those threats; to coordinate the timely execution of a proposed plan; and to make all those decisions in a way that balances respect for family, parental rights, due process, children’s safety, and a child’s long run best interest.

As everybody in this room knows, these are extraordinarily difficult tasks – tasks that require deep training, intelligence, educated insight, analytic skills, exceptional judgment, life experience, good supervisory back-up, commitment, confidence and courage. And everybody in this room knows that lives are at stake over how well these tasks are performed – over how good the social work is. But go outside this room, move a degree or two of separation from the confines of child welfare and social service agencies or from the boundaries of the social work profession and we confront a pervasive innocence about what this work is and what it takes to do it effectively.

And in that innocence lie the seeds of a deepening professional and public policy and ultimately social crisis in this country. Put simply that crisis is this: There is, in the United States today, a widening gap between the expectations the public has for the performance and achievement of our child welfare, child care, and youth serving systems AND the support the public is prepared to provide in order to recruit, develop, retain and reward a professional frontline workforce capable of meeting those expectations.

At some level, many of us have known of this disconnect for a long time. We’ve known that workloads, salaries, rewards and recognition for social workers were often not commensurate with the difficulty or importance of what we were asking them to achieve.

Some of us, I think, have hoped that social workers were a sufficiently peculiar breed that they could somehow survive or bridge this disconnection. I think we may have hoped that the “dedication to people,” the impulse to serve, the willingness to sacrifice, the commitment to social ideals would motivate enough social workers to take up this work, to stay at it, and succeed, despite mounting obstacles and the absence of core supports or incentives.

To some degree this hope may have been well grounded. There is evidence that social values and “helping” motives have and continue to propel individuals into this field and keep them working heroically to meet increasingly challenging expectations. But there is also reason to predict a breaking point – the point where there ceases to be a workforce which is sufficiently prepared, motivated, and supported to do the work required.

I think we are on the verge of that breaking point in the delivery of critical child and family services in this country. The fact that a New Jersey child protection worker has 107 cases is surely a measure of an approaching crisis. The fact that “counselors” in New York City youth programs are helping to place their young clients in jobs that pay more per hour than they themselves are making is a measure of that crisis. The fact that we are relying, in Georgia, on

English literature majors, with two weeks of training, to provide family violence counseling to Spanish speaking families is a measure of that crisis. Granted these are anecdotes. They could be exceptions. But unhappily, I'm increasingly convinced they are not.

This unease is more than a hunch. After concluding there wasn't enough readily available data on the state of the human service workforce, the Casey Foundation, in conjunction with the Brookings Institution, undertook a broad survey of frontline social workers in child welfare, child care and youth services.

Our findings, which will be formally released later this month, tell a story of an industry that is egregiously failing to prepare, attract, retain, support, or reward a workforce ready and able to take on the jobs that are asked of them. In any sector this would represent a terrible inefficiency and missed opportunity. In the human services systems designed and funded by government to help the most vulnerable children and families, the consequences are terribly costly in both financial and human terms. Among many other things, we found a large share of the workers interviewed described themselves as overworked, under stress and not appreciated or rewarded for their efforts and skills. In our survey, 81% of frontline workers said it is easy to burn out on their jobs; 70% said they have too much work to do; over half feel unappreciated by their employers for bearing such heavy responsibilities. Workloads are described as entirely out of line with expectations; in child welfare, for example, average caseloads are twice the recommended levels. Not surprisingly, entry level social work compensation is among the lowest for any professional category tracked by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Furthermore, the higher up the career or responsibility ladder a social worker goes, the worse the comparative pay gets.

These and other findings make clear that lots of social service workers – lots of our social work colleagues – are poorly treated, unfairly treated, badly treated.

But the crisis, here, goes beyond the status of a group of professionals, beyond the condition of a field. The even greater crisis is the one that confronts the essential public systems whose quality of performance cannot be separated from the quality of its workforce.

Child welfare systems that cannot fill vacancies, that attract progressively less well-educated graduates, who turn to workers with limited social work training, who operate with chronically high staff turnover, who accommodate ever increasing caseloads, and who tend increasingly to lose some of their brightest staff to other careers and other work – these are child welfare systems that, sooner or later, don't work. They are systems that fail to strengthen families, fail to protect endangered children, fail to bring children to permanence, and fail to assist kids to make successful transitions to adulthood.

In other words, they are systems that fail to achieve the results for which they were created and funded. In this failure lies an egregious waste of public resources, and a huge unmeasurable cost to the well-being of vulnerable kids and families.

As many of you know, the Casey Foundation has worked for ten years to foster improvements in state and urban child welfare systems across the country. We've worked hard

to promote financing reforms, organizational reforms, family-centered principles, management and leadership reforms, best practice standards, supervisory improvements, and other critical policy reforms. In many places, to the credit of our local partners, these reforms have led to real and exciting improvements. Investigations are better tracked, risk assessments are more clearly defined, team decision-making is improving placement decisions, families and kin are more routinely involved, foster home recruitment is up, reliance on shelters is down, overall admissions to placement are down, lengths of stay are shortened, and the path to permanency is accelerating.

But we also know that these child welfare system successes, like similar efforts to strengthen juvenile justice and early childhood systems – these successes ultimately depend on – and will be sustained by the quality of practice that occurs from social worker to child, social worker to family, social worker to community. Put plainly, there is no sustainable human service system reform without a trained, supported stable frontline, a frontline equipped with the education, tools, the resources, and the supervision critical to good practice.

The Casey Foundation’s recognition of that core reality, combined with our increasing appreciation of the deepening erosion of support for work and workers at the frontline, has persuaded us to make what we are calling the Human Services Workforce Improvement Initiative a major Casey priority in the years ahead.

As currently envisioned, that initiative will have three strategic strands. First, we intend to build on our initial impulse to support the aggressive collection, analysis and dissemination of base data on the size, status, behavior, condition, competence and performance of the workforce at the social service front line.

Second, we intend to identify, both within and outside the field, the best human resource practices, promising approaches, and effective innovations. We want to help bring these reforms to scale, promote their benefits, and encourage – through technical assistance and advocacy – their replication. We want, in the process, to reward those public systems and non-profit agencies who recognize that frontline support and practice quality are the keys to improved child, youth and family outcomes.

Finally, we are in the early stages of exploring the public education strategies, the partnerships, and the communication vehicles that will help policy-makers, politicians, the media, and the American public come to terms with and, in time, come to address the waste of public dollars and human potential that is the price we all will pay if we continue to poorly support and poorly manage the human services front line.

I am especially pleased to be here tonight because I know we have real common cause around this issue. And I know that NASW, its leaders and its members, can teach Casey a lot that will help us make a contribution to goals you all have long championed. I look forward to that partnership and thanks.