

National Association of Social Workers/Texas Chapter Policy Priorities – 2012-13

Reimbursement/Compensation for Social Workers

Proposal: To increase compensation for social workers employed by the state of Texas so that it is comparable to other similar positions; to increase reimbursement rates to social workers from public and private insurers.

Background and Purpose:

According to an article published on CNNMoney.com (October, 27 2009), social work is one of the top 15 overworked and underpaid jobs within the United States. Teachers, nurses and social workers have all been identified as careers containing shortages in many parts of the Texas. The Hogg Foundation (2009) reported that solving mental health work force issues, such as cultural competency and workforce shortages, in Texas is a vital need. “As of January 2008, the Federal Government designated 184 of Texas’ 254 counties as Health Professional Shortage Areas for licensed mental health professionals” (Hogg Foundation, 2009). This situation is indicative of the lack of support and compensation that social workers have been provided. However, social workers consistently do not receive the same level of support that teachers and nurses receive.

Social work is a licensed profession, requires similar levels of education, and has similar job descriptions to those of teachers and nurses. Yet, social workers are paid at rates that are disproportionately less than those two professions. Current salary levels for social workers are insufficient and the current salary classification system needs to be re-evaluated.

In addition to the disparity in salaries of social workers, teachers and nurses, there are differences in the benefits provided to each profession such as loan forgiveness. These practices devalue the social work profession and contribute to worker burnout and a shortage of qualified social work professionals.

Current Salary Classification Codes

Social Worker

According to the State Auditor’s Office, a Clinical Social Worker I is in salary group B15 and receives a minimum annual salary of \$31,729, which is approximately \$2,644 per month. This requires a four year degree and the passing of a nationally administered licensing exam.

Nurse

According to the State Auditor’s Office, a Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Nurse I is categorized in salary group B18. The minimum salary for this group is \$38,146, which is approximately \$3,179 per month. The Nurse I is an entry-level nursing position and does not require a Bachelor’s Degree. It only requires an individual to hold a license as a Registered Nurse, which can be accrued through a degree from a community college and a state or national licensing exam.

Teacher

According to the Texas Workforce Commission, entry-level secondary school teachers (Bachelor's Degree) can expect to receive an annual (10-month) salary of \$36,862. Entry-level primary school teachers (Bachelor's Degree) can expect to receive an annual (10-month) salary of \$36,738. An entry-level teacher operating within the Austin Independent School District can expect to receive an annual (10-month) salary of \$42,024. That gives teachers in the Austin Independent School District a monthly salary of \$4,202. This would be \$3,502 if divided among 12 months.

Figure 1 shows the minimum salary an entry-level individual will receive in all these professions. The chart shows that entry-level secondary education teachers who work in Texas can expect to receive \$36,862 for a ten year contract. Although that number is that number is sometimes different depending on which part of Texas and school district the data is being analyzed, teachers continue to receive higher salaries than social workers according to the Texas Workforce Commission.

Figure 1: Annual Salary in Dollars

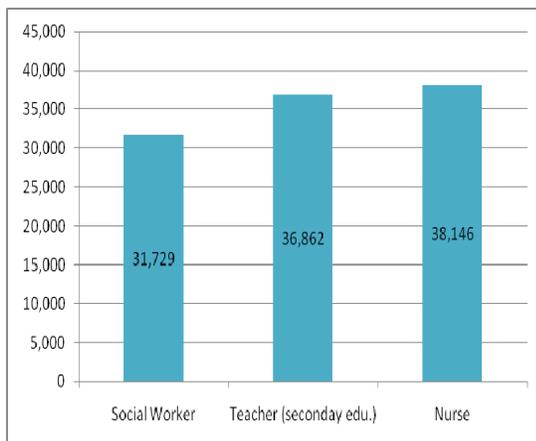
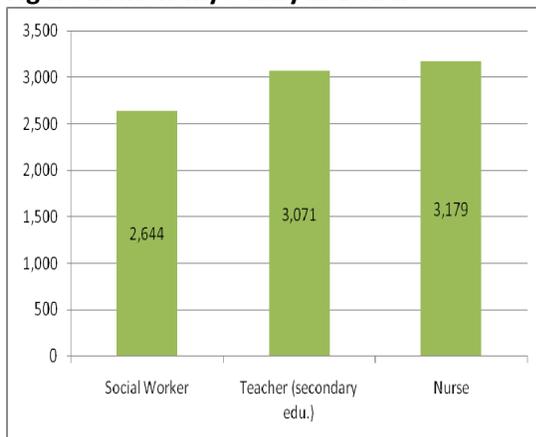


Figure 2 shows the monthly salary for teachers, nurses and social workers. Although teachers in Texas typically receive compensation along a 10-month contract, figure 2 shows their salary if it were to be divided between 12 months. Figure 2 continues to show that social workers do not receive salaries at comparable levels to teachers and nurses.

Figure 2: Monthly Salary in Dollars



Problem with Current Classification Codes

These State Auditor's classification codes determine the salary range of these and other professions. The current salary compensation for social workers is lower than both nurses and teachers. Although, according to Texas Education Agency, teachers make an annual (10 month) salary of \$27,320 they continue to be compensated at higher monthly rates than social workers because their salary is often based on a 10-month contract.

As a result of inadequate compensation for social workers, the profession experiences high turnover rates and staff in many positions lack experience (National Association of Social Workers, 2006). According to the National Association of Social Workers (2006), many social workers are dissatisfied with agency environments and current compensation levels. The profession is experiencing difficulty in retaining a sufficient and qualified workforce due to this problem (National Association of Social Workers, 2006). In order to address this growing issue many organizations have increased their use of non-social workers to fill gaps in their workforce (National Association of Social Workers, 2006). However, this perpetuates the issue because of the continual induction of unqualified or underqualified workers (see recommendations, p.7). The problem has become cyclical as a result of the current shortage of social workers.

Job Descriptions

The following are job descriptions for Social Worker I, Nurse I as provided by the Texas State Auditor's Office and Elementary and Secondary School Teachers as provided by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Social Worker I Job Description

Performs moderately complex (journey-level) social services work. Work involves serving as a liaison between clients and their families in obtaining assistance and rehabilitative treatment. Works under general supervision with limited latitude for the use of initiative and independent judgment.

Nurse I Job Description

Performs entry-level nursing work. Work involves providing for the assessment, care, and treatment of patients. Works under close supervision, with minimal latitude for the use of initiative and independent judgment.

Teacher Job Descriptions

Elementary School Teachers- Teach pupils in public or private schools at the elementary level basic academic, social, and other formative skills.

Secondary School Teachers- Instruct students in secondary public or private schools in one or more subjects at the secondary level, such as English, mathematics, or social studies. May be designated according to subject matter specialty, such as typing instructors, commercial teachers, or English teachers.

These job descriptions are general for the broad fields that are nursing and social work. Job descriptions for specific positions may vary according to the needs of varying agencies and specialties. However, the general description shows that there is little difference between an entry-level clinical social worker and an entry-level nurse except that a clinical social worker I performs journey-level social services work

while a nurse performs entry-level nursing work. A social worker I also operates under general supervision while an entry-level nurse works under close supervision.

Education

The following are education descriptions for Social Worker I, Nurse I are provided by the Texas State Auditor's Office and teacher as provided by the Texas Workforce Commission.

Social Worker I

Graduation from an accredited four-year college or university, or graduate level college or university with major course work in social work is required for a social worker position. The title social worker also requires licensure as mandated by the Texas State Board of Social Work Examiners. Some states require a Master's level social work degree. However, other states allow Baccalaureate level social workers to practice with a Baccalaureate Social Work License.

Nurse I

Graduation from an accredited four-year college or university with major course work in nursing or from an accredited nursing program is generally preferred. Students may complete a vocational program without pursuing a Bachelor's degree.

Teacher

Graduation from an accredited four-year college or university with major course work in education and a teaching license or a four-year degree in any core academic field (e.g. Math, Science, English, etc.) and a teaching license is generally preferred.

Benefits Comparison

Nurses and social workers receive similar benefits from the Texas Department of State Health Services. The differences in benefits become apparent when nurses and social workers are in positions non-government agencies. Teachers receive their benefits from the Independent School Districts. Therefore, general benefits tend not to differ between nurses, teachers and social workers. However, other benefits, such as loan forgiveness, that provides support for these professionals and provides incentives for new professionals joining their ranks are disproportionately offered to nurses and teachers over social workers.

Loan Forgiveness

Loan forgiveness is a profession-oriented benefit that teachers and nurses are able to easily attain. However, social workers do not receive the same level of educational assistance or loan forgiveness. Often, the loan forgiveness that social workers do receive is directed to a certain specialty such as healthcare and education.

Teacher

There is currently a Stafford Loan Forgiveness program for teachers (Department of Education, 2009). Upon working five consecutive years as full-time teachers for low-income families, these professionals receive loan forgiveness of up to \$17,500 toward their Stafford Loans (Department of Education, 2009).

Anyone who works with children can also have a portion of their Perkins Loan forgiven. Teachers can have up to 30 percent of this loan forgiven for five years of full-time service (Department of Education,

2009). Child protective case managers and social workers also fall within this loan forgiveness program. However, this program excludes a large number of social workers who work in other fields (Department of Education, 2009).

Several state-specific loan repayment programs are also designed to assist teachers who work in these states. For instance, Texas has a Teach for Texas Loan Repayment Assistance Program designed to attract and retain teachers in shortage areas. This loan provides teachers with \$5,000 loan forgiveness for work in needed locations (American).

Nurse

Nurses also have a number of opportunities for loan forgiveness. For example, the Nursing Education Loan Repayment program provides nurses with up to 85 percent loan forgiveness for three years of service in shortage areas (Health). The Department of Health and Human Services recently released \$13.4 million in financial assistance to support nurses (Health, 2009, August 12) The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is providing \$500 million to bolster and expand the healthcare workforce through scholarships, loan forgiveness, and other healthcare assistance expenditures (Health)

Social Worker

Social workers also receive loan forgiveness through various methods. However, many of the loan forgiveness programs are limited to the healthcare field or child centered settings. For instance, social workers can receive forgiveness of Stafford and Perkins Loans as long as the social worker provides services in a setting that is targeted for teachers and nurses. This excludes many social workers who work with various other populations such as homelessness.

Recommendations

Additional research needs to be conducted to evaluate the job responsibilities and educational requirements for social workers, teachers and nurses in order to better understand the core reasons for the disparities between the three professions. The compensation disparity between the social workers, nurses, and teachers should be critically examined in these studies.

The current salary classification codes should be changed to decrease the difference in monetary compensation of social workers, nurses, and teachers. Social workers need to be paid at levels that are equal to teachers and nurses.

Benefit 1

By using social workers and ensuring stability and continued growth of the profession, society experiences savings on many levels. These savings include increasing people's economic contribution to society, less mental health issues, and increasing school attendance for many kids. These savings increase exponentially because social workers help families leave the cycle of poverty that forces future generations to lack capital in the same ways that the previous generations did.

Benefit 2

Another benefit of these recommendations is that social services departments will be able to attain and retain qualified, licensed individuals to perform social work services. As result, social services clients such as children and other vulnerable populations will receive services from a qualified professional. "A qualified workforce is necessary to provide access to quality, appropriate mental health services" (Hogg Foundation, 2009). This is true when working with any vulnerable population.

A reduction in turnover of social work positions will also save money for social services departments and states because there will be less resources spent training new staff. There will also be a larger population of knowledgeable and experienced staff to work in these vital positions.

The social work profession will be able to recruit new people into the profession. This will help ensure that there is staff available to meet the needs of clients and society and ensure that clients receive the best care possible.

Summary

Nursing, teaching, and social work are all important professions that serve others and society. Although all three of these professions have been identified as vital and in need of support, social work has continued to lack the support that nursing and teaching have received. This has hurt not only social workers, but also the clients they serve and the economic stability of society. However, continued interest in this issue and a re-evaluation of the current salary classification codes can reverse these dangerous trends and strengthen this important profession and the larger society.

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Social Work Center for Workforce Studies

Proposal: Establish a center or unit to monitor employment trends for social workers in Texas and research important profession-related issues.

Background and Purpose:

People who work in the health and human services arena have long understood the fact that there has always been a great need for more people trained as social workers. Social workers traditionally have been challenged by such work-related issues as fair compensation and benefits, safety, workplace conditions, turnover, supervision and training. They have used different methods to convince their employers and/or policy makers of these challenges, but often have not been heeded or heard.

Recent economic and demographic shifts point to an increased need for social work services in many practice areas such as gerontology, employment/training, child welfare, criminal justice, juvenile justice, health care, military/veterans affairs, substance abuse, and mental health. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has predicted that employment of social workers will increase by 16 percent over the years 2008-2018, which is faster than the average for all occupations (http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos060.htm#projections_data). This fact suggests the need for careful planning based on accurate and timely data by policy makers to ensure that the various community needs are being adequately addressed.

In Texas, both the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health and the Guardianship Advisory Board have determined that of all the mental health and/or helping professions, that the nationally accredited schools of social work, with a uniform curriculum, best provides the kind of training needed for the various populations served. The Halliburton Global Employee Assistance Program has also identified social workers as the preferred provider for its mental/behavioral health services. The need for social workers by the U.S. military is so great that it has created “full-ride” scholarships for students in social work education. The need for social workers by the Veterans Administration in Texas has resulted in its raising of compensation and benefit levels, thereby draining state health and human service agencies of their social work-trained workforce. An independent organization such as the proposed center within the state hierarchy would likely give credibility to the research and be more readily incorporated into the state’s health and social service planning efforts. Moreover, the unit would be housed within the health and human services statistical organization, thereby providing easy access to statewide data. No additional organizational structure would be needed since the Department of State Health Services already has that structure in place.

To assess the attitudes of Texas social workers on such a surcharge, NASW/Texas conducted two surveys. At its annual conference in October, 2010, attendees were asked if they would be willing to pay

the surcharge that would fund the workforce center. Of the 512 respondents, which included NASW/Texas members (353) and non-members (159), the results were as follows:

Yes: 69.73% (358)

No: 26.37% (135)

Don't Know: 3.8% (19)

A second survey of members only, using a Survey Monkey application, provided similar results, especially with the member responses (n=1,016) from the conference survey (see below). These results would indicate that Texas social workers see the value of having a workforce center, although non-members are clearly not as supportive of the concept.

Yes: 72% (736)

No: 18% (182)

Don't Know: 10% (98)

Analysis:

The bill establishes a Social Work Resource Section within the Health Professions Resource at the Department of State Health Services., and would be under the governance of the Statewide Health Coordinating Council. The proposed Center would be modeled after the Texas Center for Nursing Workforce Studies. Staff at the Social Work Center would conduct research and collect and analyze data concerning educational and employment trends for social workers in the state. Research would also focus on supply and demand of the workforce, demographics, areas of practice, comparisons with national trends, and the analysis of workforce shortages in the international border area.

A surcharge of \$10.00 would be added to all social work licensing renewal fees and be designated to fund the Social Work Center for Workforce Studies. A \$10.00 surcharge on the licenses of approximately 25,000 social work licensees in the state would render about \$250,000 each biennium. Half that amount (\$125,000) would be adequate to fund one researcher and one technical assistant per year.

National Association of Social Workers/Texas Chapter Policy Priorities – 2012-13

Loan Repayment Program

Proposal: Pass legislation creating a loan repayment program for BSW and MSW students in Texas. Qualified students would be eligible to receive up to \$5,000 for repayment of student loans for each year that they served in a rural or underserved Texas community or in a designated workforce shortage practice area. Maximum benefit amount per student would be \$20,000.

Background: Loan repayment is a profession-oriented benefit that teachers and nurses are able to easily attain. However, social workers do not receive the same level of educational assistance or loan repayment. Often the loan repayment that social workers receive is directed to a certain specialty such as healthcare or protective services. The loan debt of social workers is general higher than for teachers as a result. The Public Interest Research Groups' Higher Education Project found that:

- Nationally, 23% of public college and 38% of private college graduates would have unmanageable debt as starting teachers.
- Nationally, 37% of public and 55% of private college graduates would have unmanageable debt as starting social workers.

A recent survey by the Council on Social Work Education found that the average loan debt of social work students graduating in 2004 with a master's degree in social work was \$26,777; those with bachelor's degrees in social work faced repayment of \$18,609 in loans and those with doctoral degrees in social work were \$32,841 in debt.

In a 2009 survey of masters-level social work students at the University of Texas at San Antonio, 2/3 of respondents indicated that they had incurred \$40,000 or more of debt in student loans and more than half indicated that it would take over 15 years to pay back their loans. In addition, nearly half of the respondents indicated that they would enter a profession outside of social work in order to be able to pay back student loans. All the respondents indicated that current loan forgiveness programs are insufficient to attracting and maintaining a social work workforce in Texas adequate to meet the needs of clients.

In 2010, the average annual (15 semester hours, fall and winter semesters) cost of tuition for a public institution is \$6,566. If a student must also pay for books, supplies, room, board, transportation and personal expenses, the total annual amount equals \$19,434. That translates to \$26,264 tuition and \$77,736 total for a 4-year baccalaureate social work degree and an additional \$13,132 tuition and \$38,868 if the student goes on to pursue a master's in social work degree for an two additional years. A master's degree in social work graduate can easily accumulate a total tuition debt of \$39,396 or a total tuition plus expenses debt of \$116,604 in 6 years (<http://www.collegeforalltexas.com/apps/collegecosts.cfm?Type=1&Level=10>).

Issues: There are few loan repayment programs for social work students in Texas. Moreover, the low starting salaries that most social workers receive is not enough to pay back any student loans they do have and still adequately provide for oneself and one's family.

Outside Involvement: NASW/Texas will need bill sponsors and enough legislative support to pass a social worker loan repayment bill. Schools of Social Work and various state health and human service agencies will likely support the concept.

Fiscal Implications: Depending on the amount of loan repayment available to individuals, it could cost \$20,000 or more per participating student. We advocate the use of tobacco settlement funds or cigarette tax revenue to pay for this program.