



**Rural Social Workers' Priorities for Professional Development: Using an Exploratory Survey as Assessment**

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# Rural Social Workers' Priorities for Professional Development: Using an Exploratory Survey as Assessment

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*Timothy B. Conley, Colleen Murphy, Melissa Ewan and Elisabeth Stoeckel*

In order to better respond to current social workers' priorities for their professional development, the Montana chapter of NASW collaborated with the University of Montana School of Social Work for the largest-ever survey of this rural state's social workers. While Montana contains three urbanized areas or urban clusters, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), social workers practicing in these areas are serving clientele in the urban/rural interface and are referred to for the purposes of this study as rural social workers. Previous chapter efforts at surveying the NASW membership consisted of "one shot" single-mailing questionnaires, which yielded unconvincing return rates in the low twenty percents (Murphy, 2006). NASA hoped that if it combined its own efforts with those of university-based researchers a more robust survey could be completed. This newer collaborative effort was designed to meet multiple objectives: securing a higher rate of survey return; encouraging grassroots participation in setting the professional development priorities of the chapter; examining the perceptions of member and non-member social workers on diverse topic areas; providing an empirical basis for continuing education workshop planning; and contributing to the growing professional literature on studies of social workers.

## **Literature Review**

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, social workers reported greater work stress, less job security, inadequate training and supervision, and lower salaries (Reisch, 2006). In 2004, NASW established the Center for Workforce Studies specifically to conduct research into the current social work labor force. NASA noted, "For many years,

there has been limited information about the social work labor force.... As the demand for social work services increases, so too does the demand for data about the social work labor force" (NASW, n.d.). Also it is imperative that, as the social work profession grows, the labor force be understood. This is evidenced by the rapid increase in postsecondary academic programs between 1974 and 2000 (Schilling, Morrish, & Liu, 2008). Barth (2003) documented a dearth of information about the social work labor market, and noted that prior to 2004 the most comprehensive overview of the profession was the 1997 work "Who We Are: A Second Look" by Gibelman and Schervish based on 1995 NASW national membership data, which excluded many people who were providing social work services.

Recent studies conducted by the Center provide insight into established employment trends and instructional/training needs. They also serve to help establish data needed to advance the role of professionally minded people in multiple care systems and to improve the public image of the profession, which Gross (2007) argues is fairly negative and results in low pay for social work jobs. Studies of groups of professional social workers give voice to those employed in what is considered one of the unique professions of our time (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). One study, conducted by the Center in fall 2004, specifically examined the suitability and capacities of the labor force to meet the changing needs of society. This benchmark national survey of licensed social workers explored the demographics of professional social workers, their practice settings and work locations, the activities and tasks

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performed by social workers, the adequacy of educational and training backgrounds (both initial and ongoing professional development needs), current compensation benefits, attitudes of social workers about their profession and their work, and perceptions about the job market for social workers (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). A random sample of 10,000 social workers was drawn from social work licensure lists of 48 states and the District of Columbia, and a three-stage mailing process followed. The first mailing was sent to all social workers in the sample, and two subsequent mailings were sent to non-respondents. The final response rate was 49.4 percent. Among those respondents, 81.1 percent reported they were currently active as social workers. The information from this survey predicted a dire shortage of social workers and was used by NASW and other organizations to inform diverse workforce policy and training/development initiatives.

In fall 2007, the Center conducted a follow-up study of 3,653 self-selecting NASW members regarding recruitment and retention of the professional workforce. This survey sought to identify the content areas of continuing education training that respondents had received in the past year, the accessibility of continuing education activities, the importance of professional development in social work, and the extent of employers' support and contribution to the professional development of social workers (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008). Overall, continuing education was viewed by a majority of respondents as very important to advancement in the social work profession. According to the authors, "While the majority of social workers identified clinical practice as the primary desired content area for continuing education, other study participants identified specialty practice areas, best practices, trauma/disaster preparedness, supervision, and ethics as additional areas in which they would like to receive more social work training" (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008, p. 8).

Similar surveys and studies have been conducted that were designed to provide a better understanding of the opinions and preferences of social workers, though the published literature in this area is sparse. Apgar and Congress (2005) worked on a national survey to examine ethical beliefs of social work researchers. They noted correctly that NASW stresses the importance of social work values and ethics. The authors suggested that in order for the profession to function within established ethical standards, it is important to know what the researchers view as ethical. The two most relevant areas of ethical behavior studied were dual relationships with clients and issues of authorship credit. The participants were randomly chosen from the membership list of 785 people, which the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) made available in 2000. This study involved a random sample of 240 participants, 160 of whom completed surveys, producing a 67 percent response rate representing 20.3 percent of the Society's overall members. The results included new information concerning researchers' ethical practices regarding the following: hiring current students as assistants; independently using students' ideas; being listed as first author on an article primarily written by a student; having sex with a former interviewee, survey respondent, or current interviewee; and other ethical dilemmas. This information proved valuable for the social workers by affording them ethical criteria against which to compare their own research practice. A similar study, focusing more specifically on the NASW Code of Ethics, was conducted by DeFranks (2006).

Conley, Schantz, Schwanfelder and Vaillancourt (2006) undertook a statewide survey of rural Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSWs) specifically focused on continuing education training needs and perceptions of graduate level teaching of addictions material. The study revealed a ground-level perception of inadequate preparedness of social workers for work with addicted constituents and a high interest in and

need for training. Two hundred ninety-four (294) rural LCSWs responded, which was 76.9 percent of the state's clinical social work population. Results from this study affirmed calls by others for increasing addiction-related educational opportunities for social workers and resulted in increased addiction training statewide. Sun (2001) used similar research methodology with a sample of social workers in addiction practice and found agreeable results. Dickinson (2004) conducted a survey of one state's NASW members to explore potential relationships between demographic variables and attitudes about social action. The response rate was 41 percent, and the study found that social action was strongly supported by social workers, the profession and social welfare agencies.

The few studies cited above represent the extant literature on the subject of today's social work labor force. Indeed, in the final report from the 2004 survey by the Center for Workforce Studies (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006), there is a marked lack of reference to additional surveys of populations of social workers about the profession, employment trends, continuing education training needs and priorities for professional development. It is within this contemporary context of the need for professional literature about social workers and their profession that the Montana chapter of NASW was inspired to conduct a survey of rural social workers. The overall goal was to empower the professional community by employing the most effective survey methodology and techniques to establish a collective voice for participants.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Sample***

The sample consisted of 1,001 Montana social workers with functioning ground mail addresses on file with NASW, 90 percent of whom were current or past members. The other 10 percent had attended a previous NASW training event or conference and joined the mailing list.

### ***Measures***

Conceptualizing survey questions was an empowering and collaborative process between the authors and the Montana NASW board of directors. The executive director held a good deal of institutional memory, having been in that post for just over nine years. Leaders from other rural state chapters were also consulted to assess what kinds of questions they had previously asked of their members. Every effort was made to construct a survey that reflected social work concerns from the rural West. Through this process, the authors conceptualized and created an original questionnaire with four sets of scaled questions addressing the following areas: issues that are most important to the membership; rating of importance of NASW activities; ideas for additional professional development opportunities and other services by the chapter; and member perceptions of aspects of NASW. The first three sets of questions were rated on an importance scale of 1=very important, 2=important, 3=somewhat important, and 4=not important. Responses to the fourth set of questions concerning member perceptions of aspects of NASW were rated on a scale of 1=strongly agree, 2=somewhat agree, 3=somewhat disagree, and 4=strongly disagree. Moreover, several non-scaled qualitative questions of interest to the board of directors were included to help establish context for the more quantified information.

### ***Procedures***

The survey adhered closely to the research guidelines suggested in Dillman's (2000) work "The Tailored Design Method," which incorporates a very specific set of empirically supported guidelines for conducting successful self-administered surveys. This method updates Dillman's previous work called "Total Design Method." These procedural guidelines demonstrate the ability to achieve relatively high response rates, consistently in excess of 50 percent. They proved highly successful for Conley, et al.

(2006) when surveying a similar population. High response rate was a key concern for the chapter.

The mailing for this survey followed a five-step procedure. First, a pre-notice letter was sent to participants indicating they would soon be given the opportunity of sharing their opinions with the chapter. This letter, and each subsequent piece of correspondence, was printed on University letterhead and was individually signed, addressed, and stamped (not metered or bulk mailed). Second, a week following the pre-notice letter, the survey booklet with cover letter and stamped return envelope was sent. Each address was printed on the envelope with a personalized return address for the participant at the top left corner. Third, in lieu of the dollar bill suggested by Dillman, a colorful, dollar-bill-sized coupon was sent offering \$15 off the cost of attending the NASW annual state conference. Dillman indicates that by providing a small token of appreciation (such as a dollar) to the respondents, the researchers show trust in the respondents. He indicates that this symbolic gesture of trust most likely explains why it is a much more effective survey tactic for improving response rate than larger post-survey payments or rewards. One week later, for the fourth step of the process, a postcard was sent to the entire sample, thanking those who completed the survey and reminding those who had not yet completed the survey to please do so. The fifth and final step of the procedure came two weeks following the initial survey mailing when a complete replacement survey and cover letter were sent to half of all non-respondents. While Dillman recommends replacement surveys for all non-respondents, resources limited this particular survey to half. All responses, both quantitative and qualitative, were entered into a data set in SPSS version 14. This study was approved beforehand by the University's Institutional Review Board.

## Results

Of the 1,001 social workers (NASW members and non-members) with functioning ground mail addresses, 49.2 percent responded ( $n=492$ ). At the time of the survey, Montana NASW had 550 registered members, all of whom were included in this survey; of these, 342 responded providing the opinions of 62.1 percent of active NASW membership. Interestingly, 446 respondents (91%) indicated that they either had been or currently were NASW members. In light of considerably less robust past response rates, this proved most encouraging for NASW leadership (Murphy, 2006). Current NASW members constituted 342, or 71 percent, of the 492 respondents. Study results are reported for all respondents collectively. The ethnic makeup of the respondents was as follows: 86 percent White; 6.4 percent Native American; .05 percent Asian/Pacific Islander; and 7.2 percent reported as other.

Just under half of the respondents reportedly held an LCSW (49%). Those who held an MSW totaled 77.1 percent, and those who held a BSW totaled 29.2 percent, (Some held both degrees.) The 27 percent difference between MSWs and LCSWs likely reflected an influx of younger members from the state's new MSW program who were not yet licensed. Respondents who reported they were Licensed Addiction Counselors totaled 6 percent of the sample, and respondents holding a DSW or Ph.D. accounted for another 1.7 percent. Private practitioners comprised 153 of the 492 respondents (31%). Of the private practitioners, 119 (80.4%) served Medicaid mental health clients, whereas 216 (41.7%) of respondents overall reportedly served the mentally ill.

## Quantitative Questions

Internal consistency reliability represented by Cronbach's Alpha for the questionnaire scale measuring "Issues that are most important to the membership" was .81; for the scale "Rating of importance to members of NASW activities" it was .89; for the scale "Ideas for additional ser-

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TABLE 1. Issues that are most important to the membership

Task	M
Holding myself and other social workers accountable to the Code of Ethics	1.24
NASW advocating for mental health policies and programs	1.34
Advocacy to eliminate oppression, racism and discrimination	1.36
Advocacy for children's issues	1.44
Improving the image of social workers and the social work profession	1.62
Monitoring and advocating for professional social work services and reimbursement	1.64
Human service workers without an MSW/BSW using the title "social worker"	1.66
NASW Montana working closely with the Licensing Board	1.67
Increased Medicaid provider rates	1.72
Advocacy for those receiving public assistance	1.74
Having a recognized statewide professional association	1.76
Substance abuse treatment, rather than incarceration for those convicted of non-violent drug-related offenses	1.84
Medicaid/CHIP eligibility for social workers	1.97
Requiring a license to practice social work at the Baccalaureate and Master's non-clinical levels	2.00
Promoting loan forgiveness programs for social workers	2.09
Expanding the availability of social work education statewide	2.33

n= 425. Scale: 1 = very important, 2 = important, 3 = somewhat important, and 4 = not important. Cronbach's Alpha = .81

TABLE 2. Rating of importance to members of NASW activities

Task	M
MT NASW continuing education conference	1.56
Advocacy for client groups served by professionals	1.59
Networking	1.68
Regional continuing education meetings	1.83
Training on culturally competent practice	1.87
Advocacy efforts directed toward National Legislative issues	1.88
Outreach and collaboration with schools of social work	1.91
Chapter newsletter	2.00
Chapter email communications regarding time sensitive information	2.02
Membership recruitment to enlarge and strengthen the association	2.08
Annual Meeting of the Social Work Profession	2.10
MT NASW web site	2.12
Fundraising to support a fiscally sound organization able to meet members needs	2.13
Coalition representation/Inter-professional relations	2.17
Specialized committee and task force activities	2.25
Annual Social Worker, Student, Lifetime Achievement and Citizen of the Year Awards	2.56

n=401. Scale: 1 = very important, 2 = important, 3 = somewhat important, and 4 = not important. Cronbach's Alpha = .89

vices by the chapter” it was .85; and for “Member perceptions of aspects of NASW” it was .79. This supports the idea that the groups of scaled questions were reliably measuring the overall constructs for which they were conceptualized. A detailed examination of the mean response to all questions from each scale is afforded by reviewing tables 1-4 (Appendix A). So that priorities may be discerned, these means are arranged in ascending order with items receiving the strongest average endorsement of importance at the top. Standard deviations, normally included when presenting means, are omitted from the tables because with narrow range ordinal level response sets they provide little useful information.

Table 1 represents issues that are most important to the membership. Members indicated that “holding [myself] and other social workers accountable to the Code of Ethics” was most important. Other areas of importance included: social workers advocating for mental health policies and programs; advocacy to eliminate oppression, racism, and discrimination; advocacy for children’s issues; and improving the image of social workers and the social work profession, among others. It is clear from these findings that ethics and advocacy were first priorities for rural social workers.

Table 2 represents survey respondents’ ratings of the importance to members of various NASW activities. Two of the top six most important activities again involved advocacy. Items measuring the importance of the “MT NASW continuing education conference” and “other educational/training activities” were apparent in four more of the six most important activities. It appears that rural social workers indicated that advocacy and continuing education were priorities for their professional development, and they were important roles for their professional association to fulfill.

Moving ahead, table 4 reveals that once again members most strongly expressed that NASW should be a powerful influence advocating in the political arena at the state and national levels, as well as maintaining a focus on legislative/political

advocacy during the state’s legislative interim. The state legislature only meets once every two years for a 90-day period, and the most effective advocacy takes place in the one-year, nine-month interval between these highly packed and sometimes frenetic sessions. In a separate analysis of items from this table concerning on-line continuing education, 70.3 percent strongly or somewhat agreed that they would take an on-line continuing education course if offered by NASW and 79.5 percent strongly or somewhat agreed that there should be more on-line continuing education opportunities. This finding continues the theme from table 2 that members rely on NASW to fulfill the dual macro level social work roles of advocate and educator.

Table 3 items were the last added to the survey by the board, almost as an afterthought, about what “value added” services NASW might provide to membership. Intriguingly, eight items from table 1 were seen as more important than any item from table 3. Nonetheless, the more highly endorsed items from this group were mentoring services for new social workers, which could be perceived as an educational role, and a hotline concerning questions on social work ethics and professionalism.

### *Qualitative Questions*

In general, the non-categorical questions generated fewer responses than those requiring a scaled answer. There were 128 responses to the question, “What are the greatest challenges to the [social work] profession in the next 5 years?” Of those, 19 responses (14.8%) concerned advocacy. Areas of concern with regards to advocacy included the disadvantaged/needily/mentally ill, children and/or the aging population, special-needs populations, and legislation for universal health care and health care reform. Nine responses to this question concerned licensing issues and another 16 concerned funding and resource challenges. Other responses included professionalism, professional integrity, title protection, and

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TABLE 3. Ideas for additional services by the chapter

Task	M
Mentoring services for new social workers	1.70
Ethics/professional concerns hotline	1.93
Membership directory	2.01
Additional specialty area focus group meetings, network, communication	2.06
Licensure exam prep course	2.10
Third-party issue consultation & training	2.28
Searchable membership database on web-site	2.29
On-line communication forum	2.43
Expanded retail/partner purchasing discounts	2.79

(n=403). Scale: 1 = very important, 2 = important, 3 = somewhat important, and 4 = not important. Cronbach's Alpha = .85

TABLE 4. Member perceptions of aspects of NASW

Task	M
NASW should be a powerful influence on the political arena at the state and national levels	1.34
MT's NASW chapter should participate in legislative/political advocacy during the legislative interim	1.44
The Central office and executive director are effective	1.70
The MT NASW office needs full time executive director and staffing	1.78
MT's NASW effectively represents the social work profession with the state legislature	1.81
MT NASW should form a political action committee to have more influence on the political arena	1.86
There should be more on-line continuing education opportunities	1.97
NASW in MT represents and promotes the social work profession well	2.03
I would participate in on-line continuing education	2.13
NASW's leadership activities are relevant to me professionally	2.16
The priorities of the Board are the same as my own professional priorities	2.16
The NASW web-site is valuable to me	2.26
The newsletter should be delivered electronically through e-mail	2.34
I feel connected to the Montana NASW chapter's Board of Directors	2.77
I regularly contact the state chapter office	3.29

n=419. Scale: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = somewhat disagree, and 4 = strongly disagree. Cronbach's Alpha = .79



social work being practiced by non-social workers.

The question “What benefits could Montana NASW provide to members in the next 2 years?” engendered 169 responses but proved very challenging to categorize. More than 40 of these responses (23.6%) suggested that they sought professional development opportunities such as continuing education units (CEUs), conferences, and more training specifically in rural areas. Respondents mentioned networking, support for new non-profit organizations, assistance with licensing exams, help with the cost of becoming a professional, and more focus, in general, on the needs of social workers in the very sparsely populated eastern half of the state.

In response to questions about connectedness to important NASW activities, a majority of members reportedly felt connected. By perceiving shared priorities with NASW leadership, endorsing access to the website and approving of the quality of NASW leadership, members evidenced a connection to the Association. Results also indicated that there was a positive correlation between respondent age and how “connected” they felt to the Association and that older members were more likely to feel connected ( $n=464$ ;  $r=.14$ ;  $p<.05$ ) than younger ones. Also, there was a positive correlation between “length of NASW membership” and “connectedness” to the Association ( $n=432$ ;  $r=.20$ ;  $p<.05$ ).

For NASW state leadership these qualitative responses proved informative. The perception of leadership adequacy was further validated by individually examining a quantitative item from the “Member perceptions of aspects of NASW” scale, which revealed that 86.2 percent of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that “the central office and executive director are effective.”

Respondents felt that NASW was effectively representing and promoting the social work profession. One area that NASW was advised to work on more was legal advocacy. Many respondents felt that a political action committee should

be formed, and as a result of this survey, one is currently being created for NASW’s Montana chapter.

Of the 226 respondents who commented on “any concerns about NASW membership,” more than 100 expressed positive statements such as “Good energetic body!”, “Great organization!”, and “I have been a member for 27+ years, I’m glad I joined!” A small amount (14 respondents) did express that membership costs were too high or prohibitive.

With regards to the further education of NASW members, 31 respondents suggested further education on mental health topics such as medication, depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, post traumatic stress disorder, personality, and bipolar disorders. Nine members showed interest in learning more about Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). Interest in further examination of substance abuse issues was suggested by 32 members, six emphasized methamphetamine use specifically and four focused on co-occurring disorders (a person experiencing a mental-health disorder in addition to an alcohol or drug dependency).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

National leadership at NASW has made it a priority to better understand the social work labor force and member concerns, setting an example with the 2004 workforce study and 2007 professional development survey. This indicates a growing body of research literature, based largely on survey methodology, which is contributing to an increase of knowledge about the profession and social work continuing education training needs. This study of rural social workers’ professional development priorities further advances this initiative.

This study showed that Montana NASW members are interested in the future of their Association. Due to the relatively high response rate (62.1%) and the amount of input respondents were willing to give, Montana NASW is now

prepared to take steps to further express their commitment to the assessed preferences and priorities of the membership and to focus on what should take precedent with regards to professional development in the future for the Montana chapter. The work has successfully empowered the membership to collectively give voice to their priorities and concerns. Results proved crucial to quantifying for Montana NASW's leadership the importance of advocacy and continuing education. This study achieved its goals of securing a convincing survey response rate, encouraging grassroots participation in setting professional priorities, and examining rural social workers' perceptions on diverse topic areas.

NASW state chapters are encouraged to collaborate with university-based researchers to employ methodologically sound survey research to assess and empower membership. All good social work intervention is preceded by thorough assessment. In the absence of this, one can only guess at the needs of the collective professional association members. Past leadership efforts have often overly relied on low survey response rate or the subjective and qualitative experiences of board members and executive directors. Leadership's experience is best used to inform the development of survey questions. In essence, practice wisdom can be used in a qualitative process to conceptualize what needs to be asked of the professional membership. The authors do not advocate a standardized set of assessment questions for all state chapters, but do encourage those chapters and other social work professional organizations (such as SSWR, Council on Social Work Education, Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work, etc.) to explore and quantify member concerns, educational needs, and priorities. The authors suggest that survey is the most effective form of macro-level assessment for the profession.

This study did pose certain methodological challenges. Resources limited full replacement surveys to only half of all non-respondents; a

higher, more assuring response rate likely would have been achieved had all non-respondents received replacement surveys. Also, analysis of results could be strengthened by further qualitative examination of the open-ended question responses. The survey relied heavily on scaled question responses, which necessarily reduce and de-contextualize information. Finally, it could also appear from the scaled responses that social workers find everything "important" or "very important." Few ranked items exceeded 10 percent of respondents indicating that, on a 4-point importance scale, they were "not important." Nonetheless, the scaling did reveal some items as more important than others.

Further assessment surveys of social workers that employ qualitative or mixed methodologies would be a welcome and needed contribution to better understanding the professional development needs of the social work profession.

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