



Promoting socially just community-based mental health services through Police Social Work: An interdisciplinary collaborative university model

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| Journal: | Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education |
| Article Title: | <i>Promoting socially just community-based mental health services through Police Social Work: An interdisciplinary collaborative university model</i> |
| Author(s): | <i>Hawkins, Selber, Morley and Vaughan</i> |
| Volume and Issue Number: | <i>Vol.26 No.2</i> |
| Manuscript ID: | 262044 |
| Page Number: | 44 |
| Year: | 2023 |

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work or its Center for Social and Behavioral Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published two times a year (Spring and Winter) by the Center for Social and Behavioral Research at 1923 San Jacinto, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

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Abstract

Police Social Work (PSW) is a reform approach to community-based practice to divert mental health and related nonviolent behavioral crises from arrest or further involvement with law enforcement. First, this article provides an overview of the PSW approach, including a brief history, current models, and practice considerations, including issues of racial and mental health equities. Second, it describes a Social Work and criminal justice collaborative PSW project initiated in June 2020 at a large Texas public university. The project engages the university and community through targeted activities to promote systemic change by integrating education, practice/policy, and research. The objectives are to enhance social justice through evidence-based, community-oriented policing to serve vulnerable populations effectively, safely, and humanely.

Introduction

The tragic murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 by Minneapolis police officers ignited long-simmering anger and concerns across the country and globally over social injustice and racial inequality in law enforcement. While there is no consensus on the deeply rooted causes of these ongoing problems in policing, there appears to be growing national opinion on the need for fundamental changes in law enforcement, although the nature and extent of these changes are still being debated. There are three broad arguments that have emerged to address this community need: (a) abolish, (b) defund, and (c) reform policing. Abolishing calls for the elimination of police and replacing them with social services that address the systemic sources of crime, yet how this change would be effectively implemented while protecting public safety is not clear (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018). Defunding entails lowering police budgets or decreasing police involvement in responding

to crime and calls for service. And reforming involves a change in departmental budgets and how police officers operate (Vaughn et al., 2022). There are still no definitive answers on the best choice, and community decisions, which are often value-driven rather than evidence-based, are being implemented in local jurisdictions throughout the United States. The community models of Police Social Work that have been derived from these events and changes are varied, and the evaluation of how these have been effective is still being debated and examined. In short, although there have been advances made in developing approaches, the field of Police Social Work is still evolving in terms of program development and evaluation.

This article provides an overview of a project on social justice within a large university in Texas. The article offers an overview of the core literature on Police Social Work as well as practice models that currently exist across the nation. It also describes the collaboration between a School of Social Work and School of Criminal Justice including initial joint activities and future plans to work towards a more inclusive training curriculum for Police Social Work across the two schools. Ultimately, the project hopes to produce better training for the needs of policing in the community. Policy and service implications are also suggested.

Literature Review

Police Social Work (PSW) is an established reform-based approach to integrated community-based practice. Professional MSW-level Social Workers are employed by Police Departments (PD) to work in collaboration with frontline Police Officers (PO) in responding to behavioral health crises rather than through separate systems. Patterson (2008) notes that the major functions of police patrol work are fighting crime (20%) and providing services (80%), although police academy training emphasizes crime fighting (80%) over service provision (20%). As such, Police Departments may employ

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Social Workers to assist Police Officers with service-related functions, especially those involving nonviolent behavioral health crises, such as mental health, drug abuse, and homelessness. Ideally, this approach benefits all parties; since Social Workers have specialized training, police can then focus on crime prevention and public safety, and people in crisis are diverted from arrest and provided appropriate mental health and other needed social services (i.e., housing, healthcare, income assistance).

The idea of PSW can be dated to 1919, when Vollmer, regarded as the “father of American policing,” proposed collaboration between police and social service agencies as a crime prevention strategy (Patterson & Swan, 2019). These authors note that PSW as a specialized practice was first documented in 1952 and peaked in 1987. Roberts (1976) states that “police social work had a promising start in the early decades of this [20th] century but then faded, largely as a result of adverse publicity and sexist misconceptions” (p. 294). Despite a long history of addressing a wide range of problems through multiple models (Holdaway, 1986; Michaels & Treger, 1973; Roberts, 2007), PSW eventually became focused on providing victim services within Police Departments, primarily in response to crimes related to child welfare and domestic violence (e.g., Sullivan, 2011).

The field flourished after 1968 when The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), established in that year, funded urban Police Departments’ hiring of trained Social Workers to assist Police Officers in helping people with a variety of social problems and conditions. Then, 14 years later when the funding ran out in 1982, the role of PSW diminished, and Police Officers’ duties again expanded (Tulane University School of Social Work, 2019). Also, the role of PSW gradually included behavioral health in the 1960s-1980s with the impact of deinstitutionalization and the subsequent failure to develop comprehensive community-based services. The criminal justice system filled the gap, bringing Police Officers into greater contact with people experiencing behavioral crises that required more specialized skills than they possessed. Raphael and Stoll (2013) refer to this shift from mental hospitals to prisons and jails as “transinstitutionalization” (p. X). Compared to the 1950s, persons with serious mental illness today

are three times more likely to be in a jail or prison than a mental health facility (Taheri, 2016).

This structural change was coupled with an “increasing emphasis on individual rights,” and law enforcement attempted to adapt (Cotton & Coleman, 2010, p. X). However, there were barriers within Police Departments that prevented PSW from becoming more prevalent, such as funding, safety concerns, regulations, and professional differences (Patterson, 2008). In addition, Social Work became less engaged with law enforcement over time due to systemic legal changes, such as federal laws viewed as discriminatory and punitive, that led to higher incarceration rates for nonviolent offenses (especially around drug policies) and disproportionately affected the poor and people of color. These outcomes were seen as not compatible with Social Work values. Also, Wood and Watson (2017) contend that the “role of police as mental health interventionists” was contentious because they relied on a “warrior” rather than a “guardian” mindset in performing their complex duties (p. X). As such, PSW decreased from the 1980s, although it never disappeared entirely. (For a full discussion of PSW, see Patterson [2020, 2022]).

Our society is at a critical juncture regarding problematic policing and complex community needs that converge on issues of public safety, divisive politics, and conflictual race relations, which intensified after Floyd’s murder, although it was preceded by incidents of police killings of unarmed Black people spread widely by social media. There is contentious debate about how to address these critical social issues. Social Work should actively participate and provide leadership, and PSW is at the center of this role. While PSW is broadly defined, it is used here specifically to refer to collaborative efforts between police, Social Workers, and perhaps other providers and stakeholders in the community to solve community needs. Rogers et al. (2019) note that, in 2018, about 25% of fatal shootings by Police Officers involved people with mental illness. George Floyd’s murder could perhaps have been prevented if PSW had been used. It is a reform-oriented approach which is consistent with Social Work values and it is being implemented in a broad array of municipalities across the United States today.

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While police have always responded to emergencies, including behavioral health crises, this is not what they are trained to do. Generally, they do not want this responsibility, and their response can lead to undesirable outcomes. In the absence of a comprehensive community mental health system, police are often the first and only responders to emergency (911) calls on a 24/7 basis, and they often have few available options to ensure appropriate care other than arrest and detention or admission into medical emergency rooms. As such, mental health problems are overrepresented in prisoners and jail inmates (40%) as compared to the general population (5%) (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017). For example, according to Abramson (2021), “it is estimated that at least 20% of police calls for service involve a mental health or substance use crisis, and for many departments, that demand is growing” (p. 30). The amount of time and resources spent on these calls is increasing, many of them for repeat crises with the same individuals, placing a greater burden on already stretched law enforcement and medical resources.

Models of Police Social Work

There is no single terminology or design for alternative approaches to such routine police-involved responses. There are two main models available to avoid the escalation of nonviolent crises, and each has some variations within it. First, Critical Incident Teams (CIT) consist of frontline Police Officers trained specifically in mental health practices. Second, Co-Response Teams (CRT) consist of a Police Officer paired with a mental health practitioner (Koziarski et al., 2021).

The first model Critical Incident Team (CIT) was implemented in Memphis, Tennessee in 1988 following the fatal shooting of a man with mental health problems (Watson & Fulambarker, 2012). This approach has been the most widely used (Lurigio & Watson, 2010). Peterson and Densley (2018) conducted a systematic review of the effectiveness of CIT models and found inconclusive results, attributed to methodological issues, and recommend that future protocols include evidence-based evaluations. Rogers et al. (2019) report that systematic studies of Critical Incident Teams show no evidence of outcome effectiveness for objective measures (arrests, injury, death, or use of force), which they also

attributed to methodological differences. They did find support for officer levels of satisfaction and perceived use of force and mixed support for diversion.

Police Social Work is seen as being a part of the Co-Response Team (CRT) model embedded within a Police Department. A variation of the CRT model may consist of an EMS medic and a practitioner from a mental health center or social service agency. These multiagency CRT models require additional levels of coordination within and between members (Bailey et al., 2018).

Mobile Crisis Intervention Teams (MCIT) are essentially a different type of CRT model designed specifically to respond to mental health crises, although there is no clear evidence on what processes or components are most effective (Kirst et al., 2015). One significant difference between CIT and CRT compared to MCIT is that the latter usually includes follow-up care by connecting to social services. MCIT are considered “secondary responders” since the risk of violence has already been determined as low, either by a specially trained dispatcher or by a Police Officer onsite. Models vary as to whether a Police Officer accompanies the team on the call once the police have determined that there is no current safety risk and EMS has ruled out a medical need. MCIT should not be confused with the “community-based responder model” affiliated with the defund movement in which mental health providers are first responders on “less serious” emergency calls instead of police (Dee & Pyne, 2022).

Implementing CIT, CRT, or MCIT varies depending upon the municipality. Some variables in these models include driving together versus separately, using a marked versus unmarked car, or dressing in an identifiable way versus plain clothes. Additionally, specially trained dispatchers may assess the situation in advance, or it may be done on-site. Police Officers may arrive first and decide to call the team, they may accompany the team and leave when not needed, or they may call the team after safety is established. Regardless of the procedures employed, an underlying concern is to appear non-threatening so as not to arouse fear in the distressed individual. Some models include a peer counselor with a history of working with mental illness to reduce the perceived threat. There is limited empirical evidence on which model or

methods are more effective (Patterson & Swan, 2019), and the model used depends upon the preferences and resources of the local jurisdiction as well as Police Officer discretion. In addition, the literature also identifies that a larger benefit of implementing well-designed CRT models is that they may enhance community trust in police (Thompson & Kahn, 2016).

There are numerous examples of MCITs being implemented around the country in a variety of ways, available in both scholarly literature and the popular press. It should be noted that similar MCIT have emerged in Canada (Kozierski et al., 2021), Europe, Australia (Morgan et al., 2022), and other countries around the world. Many of these countries face the same challenges as the United States in that police have become the primary responder to behavioral health crises, often with comparable mixed results. While the differences in healthcare and law enforcement systems in the United States make cross-country comparisons extremely difficult, there are some initial exploratory findings suggesting preliminary success. Ghelani et al. (2022) conducted a review of CRT in Canada and found support that they “reduce involuntary hospital transport, improve referrals, and decrease emergency room wait times” (p. 86), but more research is needed to determine if they “reduce the use of force and meet client’s needs in the community” (p. 86). Giwa (2018) posits a lack of evidence for the effectiveness of community policing in Canada, especially for “racialized communities” (p. 710), proposing PSW as a more promising change model to improve police-minority relations.

The national debate on policing also extends to the Social Work profession, especially around advocacy for the abolish and defund movements. Reflecting this position, Jacobs et al. (2021) argue that PSW constitutes “carceral social work ... in which coercive and punitive practices are used to manage Black, Indigenous, other people of color, and poor communities across four social work arenas – gender-based violence, child welfare, schools, and health and mental health” (p. 37). Further, they advocate for “anti-carceral social work interventions [that] dismantle police collaborations and point to life-affirming, community-centered, and mutual aid alternatives” (p. 37). The division within the profession is exemplified by two opinion pieces

in the Wall Street Journal (Wright, 2020). Riley (2020) reflected on the abolish position, questioning the effectiveness of PSW given the profession was so “ineffective in the child welfare system”, particularly for Black Americans. In response, Angelo McClain, the CEO of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; as conveyed by Wright) responded that Riley was “wrong on all counts.” He noted that Social Workers are “playing a vital role” in Police Departments across the nation, “helping officers [to] do their jobs more effectively and humanely and become better attuned to cultural and racial biases” so they can “better serve their communities ... and achieve better public safety outcomes.”(no p.)

Another safety concern related to this debate is the risk posed to PSW in response to actual or potential violent crisis calls. A Police Department chief, Shults (n.d.), raises multiple concerns in regard to abolish or defund arguments. While acknowledging that “non-law enforcement” (NLE) teams deserve consideration and research, there are basic questions that should be answered before police are removed from protecting them. He identifies these as training, making the scene safe, reporting a crime, collecting data, responder injury or assault, screening and selecting calls, and antagonism. The safety of NLE teams does not appear to be addressed in the scholarly literature. It seems that this may be an important issue as this model becomes more prevalent.

George Floyd’s murder brought more focused scrutiny on policing practices around disparities related to race, especially the intersectionality with mental illness. About one-quarter of people killed by police exhibited signs of mental illness (Frankham, 2018), and Black people are over three times as likely to be killed by police as white people (Schwartz & Jahn, 2020). Balfour et al. (2022) point out that “how a community responds to behavioral health emergencies is both a public health issue and a social justice issue” (p. 658), which are exacerbated for people of color due to racism and implicit bias. They advocate for policy reforms to develop a crisis system (not just crisis services) that coordinates with law enforcement to provide a comprehensive continuum of care. The component parts include CIT and training, dedicated specialty teams (CRT & MCIT), crisis call centers, and post-crisis care.

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This model provides an overall framework that can be enhanced by other areas of scholarship.

Others call for police reform to address more specific strategies. Bailey et al. (2022) note the confluence of vulnerabilities and call for more research on police hiring practices, bias training, and trauma-informed policing. An important mediating variable influencing both individual and community willingness to call for help during a crisis is trust in police. This is a complicated variable that is receiving more research attention (e.g., Frankham et al., 2021; Thompson & Kahn, 2016). Watson et al. (2021) caution that reforming (or defunding) police to shift mental health crisis responsibility from police to a crisis response system must not magnify racial inequities that may already exist in the criminal, legal, and health systems. They advocate for proactive solutions, such as “racially equity impact statements in making policy decisions, critically examining how risk is assessed in crisis calls, and reducing possibilities for racial bias in deciding on the appropriate response ... [expanding the] mental health profession’s workforce capacity to better support entry for people of color,” fully engaging communities of color in planning and implementation and holding the systems accountable (p.6).

Building Educational Approaches for Enhancing Collaboration

More than two years after the murder of George Floyd, the policy debate on how to change law enforcement practices around policing continues. Universities should be at the forefront of this critical, complicated, and controversial discourse. One of the major functions of universities is to conduct evidence-based research to support best practices. Schools of Criminal Justice are at the center of this effort, although they can partner with other related disciplines to develop more comprehensive and effective models.

To meet the community needs for PSW, it is critical to educate future graduate-level Social Workers to practice this justice-based approach. Also, mental health professionals on MCIT, who are primarily Social Workers, require multifaceted expertise. Ghelani (2022) specifies the following knowledge and skills: “capacity to engage complex clients, de-escalate tensions, assess for risk, plan for safety, provide brief

addiction counseling, diffuse interpersonal conflict, link clients with community resources, advocate for change, challenge systemic racism, build constructive relationships, and document services with awareness of relevant legislation” (p. 414).

It is important to cross disciplinary boundaries within universities so that faculty and students in Social Work and Criminal Justice students, along with related human service professions, can interact and find common ground. Almost 50 years ago, Roberts (1978) identified a vital need for this professional collaboration, including PSW training in Police Departments and university education.

There are a variety of ways that universities can pursue this educational collaboration. While many universities have separate Social Work (Masters of Social Work, MSW) and Criminal Justice (Master of Arts/Masters of Science, MA/MS) degree programs, there are options for Social Work and Criminal Justice programs to integrate key curriculum concepts needed by both. Universities with greater resources offering clinical or direct practice MSW programs often have a specialization or subspecialization in a particular field of practice, and they could offer a subspecialization in Criminal Justice. A cursory internet search indicates that there are in-person and online Social Work and Criminal Justice dual degree programs. Likewise, there are Bachelor of Social Work programs with a Criminal Justice focus and MSW programs with a specialized track in Criminal Justice and Social Work. These dual degree and specialized degree programs are offered at large state universities. Some universities offer undergraduate degree programs with a double major in Social Work and Criminal Justice. Even if Criminal Justice is not a focus of the Social Work program, an elective on Criminal Justice could be offered (or vice versa) or students can be allowed to select non-Social Work courses for credit. Some MSW programs offer certificate and/or continuing education options, which are available to practitioners in the community. Finally, Social Work internships can be implemented in Criminal Justice field settings; it would be opportune if Social Work and Criminal Justice students could be placed together, including PSW teams. MSWs practicing in Police Departments can provide Social Work training in self-care and trauma-informed recovery to Police

Officers and other Police Department staff. Universities that have both Social Work and Criminal Justice Programs provide a special opportunity to collaborate. The current project occurs within a university that has both schools. The following section describes one such effort to engage in activities toward an interdisciplinary collaborative PSW model.

In summary, positive changes in law enforcement are happening across the country, primarily at the local level, although much remains to be done. It seems that, at present, reform has emerged as the dominant model over abolishing or defunding the police. Some efforts have been attempted at the federal level; although they have been largely unsuccessful, at least necessary national-level reforms are being discussed, including considerations of the interrelated issues of crisis response, mental health, and racial disparities. Robinson (2020) notes that, basically, “policing in this country is a local enterprise, and there are strong police leaders across the United States committed to reform” (p. 11). In addition to governmental entities, universities have a pivotal role to play in both educating future professionals and conducting evidence-based research. In partnership, we can promote socially just, community-based mental health services through Police Social Work on behalf of the vulnerable populations that we serve.

Background of the Current Project: University’s Mission and Setting

Texas State University (TXST) is a doctoral-granting, student-centered institution dedicated to excellence and innovation in teaching and research, including creative expression, and service. It is a public, federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). TXST’s campus of over 38,000 students is also diverse with almost 52% ethnic minorities and is one of the top producers of Hispanic baccalaureate graduates in the nation (Texas State, 2022). Approximately 88% of those enrolled are undergraduates and 12% are graduate or doctoral students. Many of our students are also first-generation college students, and about 88% are Pell grant recipients. The campus also has over 3,800 Veteran and military-connected students, representing 10% of the total student population enrolled. Having two large Reserve

Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) units on campus is part of the university’s tradition of commitment and support for special populations such as Veterans and the military.

TXST’s public mission and student-centered reputation are reflected by the history of its famous alumnus Lyndon Baines Johnson’s legacy of service. This dedication to a dual mission of education and service in addition to research is also an important part of the background context of this project. The University currently enrolls almost 550 doctoral students and had \$61 million in total research expenditures in the 2020 fiscal year and is considered a designated emerging research university.

The university sits in a corridor between Austin and San Antonio in a semi-rural area in a town of approximately 50,000 people. Students enrolled at TXST come from a multistate region as well as nationally. Enrolled students live throughout the highly populated corridor of Austin and San Antonio, including those taking classes at the offsite campus in Round Rock. The university’s surrounding area of Hays County has a significant amount of need in terms of lower socioeconomic populations.

Collaborative Model for Innovation and Change-Can Universities Meet the Challenge?

The university has developed an award-winning Veteran and military-connected program that has operated since 2008. This Veterans Initiative program has provided a model for collaboration and program development that has helped to provide a framework for the current Police Social Work Project (PSWP; Selber & Chavkin, 2012). Our team has worked diligently for over two years to develop a set of initiatives that lay the groundwork for a new model for working on an overall goal of enhancing Police Social Work solutions for communities. Some of these key elements in this model have been implemented, and others are in the planning stages. The model is discussed below.

Helping Build a Campus Climate. One challenge is to foster a climate of awareness and appreciation for our collaboration and interdisciplinary approach between faculty in Social Work and Criminal Justice as well as community representatives. This means developing an understanding among all university stakeholders—students, staff, and faculty—about

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the challenges of police and community collaboration that are faced by the university community and the greater central Texas region. Providing events that can educate and inform the university on how police and the community, including Social Work and Criminal Justice, can collaborate has been an important ongoing activity for our team. Campus-wide speaking events, class guest speakers, and community public forums on a number of topics have been key strategies to encourage collaborations. The campus climate has also been impacted by various national news stories of police and community challenges and public safety issues. The current Police Social Work Project has unfolded also in the context of many campus events and trainings focused on diversity and inclusiveness as well as open discussions about the role of police in a diverse environment and society. We have brought both local and national experts to present on campus and had participation from many departments and diverse student groups.

Developing Partnerships and Collaborations. The team's model also relies heavily on establishing and utilizing partnerships off campus and on campus to develop an interdisciplinary approach to police and community collaborations (Selber et al., 2012). This entails being involved in outreach to the local community, state, and federal public safety and Social Work disciplines and organizations. We have over 450 community agency collaborations in the School of Social Work's internship program. Of these, about 50 organizations provide internships for Social Work students that are relevant to our work in educating Social Workers to work with missions and tasks related to providing services in mental health/addiction, crisis work, juvenile justice, adult corrections, and other settings where Police Social Work practice tasks might be key roles. We have contacted a range of organizations from traditional organizations such as Police Departments to innovative models such as victim services, crisis services, and a range of community-based nonprofit and governmental organizations operating in the community that provides services that are related to our team's focus. Included in this list are such organizations as county district attorney services, juvenile justice organizations, emergency medical

services, and probation and parole services, to name a few. One example of a county organization is the Veteran's Court services where Veterans are diverted for nonviolent offenses in order to keep them in the community and out of the criminal justice system. Such Veterans can often be in crisis and in need of an innovative crisis intervention approach that helps them stay out of the correctional system. A member of our team has also consulted with the district attorney's offices on mental health issues.

Partnerships on campus are equally important. We reached out to potential faculty collaborators who are practitioners and researchers with interests such as Criminal Justice, Social Work, Psychology, Veterans' issues, Mental Health/addiction, Juvenile Justice, Sociology, and Social Justice; as they can be important collaborators. As well, campus faculty, advisor groups, and administrators are important to engaging the campus community, raising awareness on campus, and in the community about why this project can lead to better approaches to policing in the community. We have also collaborated with staff research coordinators to identify potential funding sources for targeted PSW research studies and initiatives.

Developing Peer Support and Peer Leaders. We will be focusing on building more joint peer events between Social Workers and Criminal Justice students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in the future. To date, these have mainly been panel discussions and guest speakers on the topic of Police Social Work. As well, a unique survey of Criminal Justice and Social Work students was conducted to analyze perspectives about Police Social Work tasks and challenges. We plan to develop more mixers and meetings for both sets of students so that they can start collaborating on more projects and take joint courses across both departments. This will provide our initiative with the possibility of developing peer leaders that can continue to serve on our team and encourage their peers to participate. We have students from both departments that also serve on our task force and regularly attend or help with outreach tasks.

Academic Support Services. The important role of faculty advisors is also evidenced in the literature on student affairs and student success (Troxel et al., 2021). The Police Social Work Project has a team of faculty that can provide

advice regarding how to help students interested in this topic advance their knowledge, skills, and career options. Advisors can then meet with students to discuss career pathways and to review courses that might build toward an interdisciplinary pathway for professional development. This part of the model can be amplified by raising campus advisor awareness for this career and interest area.

Career and Employment Services. Career services can also have an impact on persistence and choice of careers (NASPA, 2018). Developing an awareness of careers that merge both Social Work and Criminal Justice can help promote PSW. Concerns about being able to identify and successfully pursue a new career path are among the issues most important to students. For example, students need help from advisors in encouraging cross-training in Criminal Justice and Social Work in order to explore career plans and how steps such as elective courses and internships can help build skills and knowledge. Helping and encouraging students to obtain knowledge in both Criminal Justice and Social Work in order to be better prepared for dealing with the range of community issues presenting in the field can help identify possibilities and build students' confidence in their future.

Part of the critical work that must be done is determining how to translate their knowledge and skills across both departments to experiences in the work world and thus help bridge between academia and outside employers. The academic advisors and faculty can help bridge these disciplines and communities. Others in student services have also noted that campus career services is a key service within the campus community and suggest their importance in fostering persistence and degree completion for innovative pathways.

Training, Technical Assistance, and Certificate Workshops. A faculty and staff workshop to help the campus learn the benefits of developing collaborations and expanding the Police Social Work connection could be a timely addition to the model. This training could help raise awareness on campus of a variety of topics related to this project such as crisis intervention and staff education of the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Technical assistance can also be provided to other universities in the state and nation as they develop their own Police Social

Work projects to support their communities. This can be done through training workshops, presentations at professional conferences, video conferencing consultation, and sharing materials for program development. We are also exploring potential continuing education options to provide ongoing training (in person and online) to practitioners to promote networking.

An Internship Training Model. An important part of our approach is the utilization of internships for training students to work in this arena of Police Social Work and Criminal Justice settings using both knowledge and skills from both departments. The focus is on internships both within agencies, with their staff providing supervision of interns, or in faculty-led field units where faculty can provide adequate supervision. Using an interdisciplinary lens approach that blends Social Work and Criminal Justice in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the best practices needed in such internship settings can be an important way to support this mission of Police Social Work. We can also link alumni with students in this way.

Social Work has historically relied on field internships to build knowledge and skills. In fact, field education has been referred to as the signature pedagogy by the Council on Social Work Education (2022), and educators have examined its central contribution to learning and to enhancing services within the community in agency settings. Using a faculty-supervised field unit approach for field education can provide many advantages for training students and has already been used by Social Work education in such fields as criminal justice, juvenile justice, child welfare, and school settings (Leon et al., 2001; Selber et al., 1998). This approach to providing field supervision can extend Social Work services in areas where there are few Social Workers employed, such as Police Social Work, and can help focus on developing specific outcomes. Field units can also provide a practice setting for bridging classroom curriculum learning and skill building. In addition, field units have an advantage of supporting service provision for settings that have fewer resources and capabilities for providing supervision. Field units are also well suited to the innovation needed to address hard-to-solve social problems because it is easier to blend practice and research priorities (Selber et al., 1998).

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Our model can incorporate such a strong field education component, and we are currently actively working towards this expansion. In addition to regular outside placements in community-based agencies such as Police Departments and victim's services, students could also do training and internship work with campus models, for example in departments that provide crisis services to students in conjunction with the University Police Department. Both on-campus and off-campus field units of student interns can be developed that would provide a training setting for multiple students together in a unit dedicated to this mission.

This field unit might also be led by a Social Work faculty member to help develop the internship sites and an elective course in Criminal Justice and Social Work, such as the one currently offered, to help train students for the unit. Social Work or Criminal Justice graduate students might be placed in the unit for a first internship or volunteer hours then placed in the community in other agency settings during more advanced internships later in their program of studies. Such second placements might be located in services like Veterans Court and Police Department victim's services. This continuum would give students a wide exposure to several practice issues and cases. Internships in the community might be supervised jointly by interested Social Work and faculty in conjunction with Criminal Justice faculty and professionals inside the agencies.

The Social Work Criminal Justice Elective Course. To focus on curriculum development and collaboration among students in the Schools of Social Work and Criminal Justice, a "special topics" elective course was developed and implemented in the Summer of 2022. This graduate-level course was designed to develop knowledge and skills consistent with best Social Work practices across component parts of the criminal justice system. The course also explores interdisciplinary aspects that integrate Social Work, Criminal Justice, and related helping disciplines that are relevant to this field of practice. Primarily Social Work students were enrolled in the course on this first-class offering. The class was taught by a Social Work professor with a background and work experience in Criminal Justice, including teaching in both departments, who is also a member of the PSWP.

The course was taught via synchronous Zoom sessions and used Canvas as the course platform. The content of the course included such topics as theoretical frameworks for understanding crimes; the history of the U.S. criminal justice system; public safety and Social Work; measuring crime and critical issues in crime; law enforcement agencies; forensic Social Work and the court systems; corrections (both community and government system); CJ reforms (fair sentencing, racial disparity, health care, etc.), alternative programs/services (LE, courts, mediation, arbitration, drugs); women; implications for SW practice; special populations; and contemporary issues (racial profiling & disparities, police misconduct, suicide-by-cop, bullying, and school, campus, & workplace violence).

Project Implications and Next Steps

As the nation continues to struggle with the balance between policing best practices and the community needs, questions remain about whether universities are prepared to meet this ongoing challenge with the exploration and support of innovative models that might contribute to best practices. Universities must be proactive in taking steps to help accomplish the community's need for interdisciplinary innovative models for producing professionals that have both sets of skills—Criminal Justice and Social Work. This requires an understanding of the community's needs, a coordinated approach to supporting public safety and crisis services, and a candid review of university gaps and policies that can become obstacles to building knowledge and skills in this challenging field. It will also require a group of university champions that can advocate for blending university missions of serving, education, and research, and an effort to build and engage a network of collaborators.

This is an opportunity for universities to lead the nation and help provide timely and excellent supportive services and innovations in the Police Social Work field. An approach that embraces social justice is balanced, and emphasizes collaboration and cross-training is needed to help communities respond to ongoing challenges.

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