

## In This Issue: The Shortage of Social Workers Caring for Elders and Their Families

The swelling ranks of Americans age 65-plus have increased the demand for skilled caregivers who can address the increasingly complex and diverse healthcare and psychosocial needs of older adults. Social workers are uniquely prepared to care for older adults in a wide range of acute- and long-term-care settings by helping older adults and their families choose among, gain access to, and navigate a bewildering array of health and social services, among other important functions. According to government data, opportunities for geriatric social workers are expected to grow significantly. But, a number of barriers currently prevent them from providing optimal care to elders. Reimbursement and training policies that fail to support social work services deter individual practitioners from specializing in gerontology. The result is a shortage of professionals trained to care for the elderly. Identifying the barriers, and promoting realistic efforts to minimize or eliminate them, is the current challenge. Meeting this challenge is crucial for the future social work labor force and for an aging population that increasingly needs their services.

The Institute for Geriatric Social Work (IGSW), the National Leadership Coalition (NLC), and The New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM) have united with others in the social work arena to focus attention on this situation. Our shared goal is to create public policies that will pave the way for full and effective participation of social workers in the care of older adults and their families. Private foundations have taken the lead to providing solutions but additional efforts are needed to increase the presence and value of geriatric social workers.

## Evidence of Social Work Benefits to Quality of Life, Cost-Effectiveness

The National Leadership Coalition, organized and supported by The NYAM and The John A. Hartford Foundation, commissioned a comprehensive review of existing research on the quality and cost-effectiveness of social workers caring for older adults. The following were among the key findings of the coalition:

- I. Social work services improve the quality of older adults' lives.
  - Patients report greater *satisfaction* with their healthcare when social workers are involved, saying that the quality of their care improves and their level of social interaction increases.
  - Older people report that overall healthcare is better *coordinated* when social workers participate, and their caregivers feel less stressed and more able to cope.
- II. Participation of social workers as part of the healthcare or long-term-care team is cost-effective.
  - Early intervention by social workers helps to reduce the high cost of services by shortening lengths of stay and decreasing use of clinics and emergency rooms.

These findings signal the need to examine federal reimbursement policies so that older adults are more easily covered for social work services. Medicare and Medicaid currently impose significant barriers that impede aging individuals from seeking social work services and deter social workers from specializing in gerontological practice. This review, however, represents only a first step in establishing evidence of social workers' contribution to improving the lives of older adults. More research is needed to replicate and strengthen the cost-effectiveness findings, as well as to examine quality of care and life, and organizational efficiencies. The profession must continue to push forward a research agenda that emphasizes cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses.

## How Many Social Workers Are Working with Older Adults in the United States?

*Inferences from Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov)*

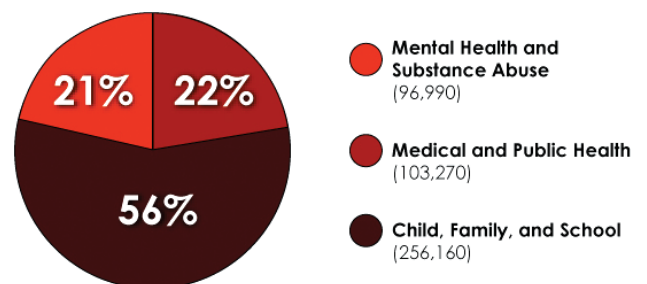
It is difficult to pin down the number of social workers caring for older adults in the United States, since there is no single organization responsible for monitoring the social work labor force. But a rough estimate may be derived by analyzing the various specialties and employment settings currently available to social workers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the term social work is found in three occupational groupings:

- "Medical and Public Health Social Workers" (almost 97,000 practitioners)
- "Mental Health and Substance Abuse Social Workers" (over 103,000)
- "Child, Family and School Social Workers" (over 256,000).

Assuming the last category represents a predominately younger client population, this leaves more than 200,000 social workers in the first two categories who could potentially be working with older adults as part of their practice (see chart).

BLS data show that approximately half of all social workers in the categories "Medical and Public Health Social Workers" and "Mental Health and Substance Abuse Social Workers" work in hospitals, local government, independent/family services, outpatient facilities, or nursing care facilities. Given demographic trends in the United States, we can speculate that older adults

### Occupational Categories of Social Workers



constitute a significant portion of clients seen in hospital, outpatient and nursing care facilities. If we count all of the social workers employed in those three settings we can infer that as many as 28 percent of social workers (or 56,000) are focused on caring for the older adults.

## Private Foundations Lead the Way

In the United States, private foundations are leading the way to address the challenges of the rapidly aging population, including the need to plan for an adequately trained social work labor force. Currently available data indicate that more trained social workers are required if the nation is to respond to the growing health, mental health, and social services needs of older people and their families.

- The BLS projects that the need for trained social workers will grow “faster than the average for all occupations through 2012,” with a particular need for gerontological social workers. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004-05).
- The percentage of social workers who identify aging as their primary area of practice remained below 5 percent in 2000 (Gonyea, Hudson and Curley, 2004).
- Too few graduating social work students are specializing in aging. In 2000, only 2 percent of the estimated 15,000 social workers who have master’s degrees selected aging as a field of practice (CSWE, 2002).

Several philanthropies have been the forerunners in launching new initiatives to promote education and training in geriatric social work. Since 1998, *The John A. Hartford Foundation* has invested \$31 million to create a multifaceted education initiative that will improve the capacity of schools of social work to train future generations of social workers to meet the challenges of an aging society. Hartford’s investments in students, faculty, new aging curricula, community-university partnerships and educational tools have raised awareness and promoted change. The *Hearst Foundation* has created scholarships that have reached more than 70 schools and departments of social work; 11 schools have trained more than 300 social workers to provide services to older people and their families.

The Atlantic Philanthropies has awarded \$4.4 million to create the Institute for Geriatric Social Work (IGSW) at the Boston University School of Social Work. IGSW is committed to improving the quality and effectiveness of training for practicing social workers nationwide, and to promoting policy initiatives—such as the publication of this Policy Bulletin—on behalf of the profession.

The impressive beginning within the private sectors must be bolstered by additional public and private support for the full contribution of social work to become a reality for our aging society.

## IGSW Launches Study on Geriatric Social Work in Primary Care

As part of ongoing efforts to demonstrate the effectiveness of geriatric social workers, IGSW is conducting a randomized controlled trial to test a social work intervention with frail elders in primary care. This two-year study, funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, will test whether a social work care-coordination model is successful in reducing unnecessary hospitalization and improving patient outcomes. The intervention utilizes Problem-Solving Therapy (PST), a validated behavioral change technique that has been shown to be effective in treating depression and other psychosocial problems. The research will assess the cost-effectiveness of the intervention and will examine the impact of adding a social worker to a large primary care practice. The trial, which plans to enroll 525 older adults, is being conducted at Kaiser Permanente Long Beach Medical Office in California. Frail older adults who are over 65, are diagnosed as having multiple chronic conditions, have had one or more emergency room visit or unscheduled hospital admission in the past six months, and are cognitively intact are eligible to participate. The findings from this important study will help inform Medicare financing and reimbursement policies for using social work services in primary care. (For more information contact Bronwyn Keefe at [Bronwyn@bu.edu](mailto:Bronwyn@bu.edu).)

### *Coming in our Next Issue...*

The National Association of Social Workers has released a preliminary report of their study “Assuring the Sufficiency of a Frontline Workforce.” The survey, conducted among 10,000 licensed social workers in the United States, found that 75% percent of the respondents report having older adults in their caseloads. Implications of this important study will be featured in the next issue of *Social Work, Aging and Public Policy: A Bulletin from IGSW and NYAM*.

## Resource Corner

### For more information on Geriatric Social Work

*Hartford Foundation*

<http://www.jhartfound.org/>

*Geriatric Social Work Initiative*

<http://www.gswi.org/>

*The New York Academy of Medicine*

<http://socialwork.nyam.org/>

*Institute for Geriatric Social Work*

<http://www.bu.edu/igsw/>

### For more information on Aging

*Administration on Aging*

<http://www.aoa.gov/default.htm>

*Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics*

<http://www.agingstats.gov/>

*National Institute on Aging (NIH)*

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/>

*The Rizzo and Rowe Report on the Efficacy and*

*Cost-effectiveness of Social Work Services* is available at

[http://socialwork.nyam.org/pdf/Efficacy\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://socialwork.nyam.org/pdf/Efficacy_Final_Report.pdf)

This Policy Bulletin is published by IGSW and NYAM.  
For information on this policy bulletin, contact Bronwyn Keefe at  
(617)358-2625 or Peri Rosenfeld at (212)419-3536,  
or visit our websites at [www.bu.edu/igsw](http://www.bu.edu/igsw) or [socialwork.nyam.org](http://socialwork.nyam.org).