BACKGROUND
Our nation’s more than 650,000 professional social workers provide essential services to more than 10 million individuals across the lifespan and have long been the workforce to guide people to critical resources, counsel them on important life decisions, and help them reach their full potential. The aging of our population, the growing needs of our veterans and their families, more people living longer with chronic diseases, increased recognition that mental health needs must be addressed in children, adolescents, and adults including older adults, and the recognition that social determinants of health affect health outcomes—all create increased demand for social workers. In fact the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects the social work profession to grow at an above average rate through 2020, with a 19% growth rate overall and 27% projected growth rate for health care social workers.1

This increased demand for social workers is coupled with serious safety concerns, high caseloads, poor working conditions, significant educational debt, and comparatively insufficient salaries that threaten the ability of our nation’s social workers to provide these indispensable services. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) projects an imminent shortage of social work professionals due to this increasing demand and the depletion of the social work force through retirements. The social work profession faces substantial challenges to recruit, retain, and replace its workforce to meet the demand.

In light of the current workforce challenges, NASW launched the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative to focus on securing federal and state investments in professional social work to enhance societal well-being. The Social Work Reinvestment Initiative addresses state- and federal-level issues related to recruiting, retaining, recognizing, and adequately reimbursing the social work profession.

One key focus is the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, previously introduced in the 113th Congress by Senator Mikulski (D-MD) and Congresswoman Lee (D-CA). It is designed to address these challenges to the profession, thereby helping to ensure that millions of individuals and families throughout the nation can continue to receive competent care. This legislation will create the foundation for a professional workforce to meet the ever-increasing demand for the essential services that social workers provide. The legislation would establish a Social Work Reinvestment Commission to provide a comprehensive analysis of issues facing the social work profession, including workforce trends, higher education debt, low salaries, diversity, and research within the academic and professional social work communities.

POLICY SOLUTION
Support the reintroduction, passage, and funding of the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, particularly the establishment of a commission to assess current and emerging trends and requirements of the social work profession.

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