

NASW's International Committee Shows Much Recent Activity

Harriet L. Lancaster, Chair, NASW International Committee

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INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

CHAIR

Harriet Lancaster, ACSW
hjloicaster@aol.com

MEMBERS

Diane Falk, PhD, LCSW
dfalk@earthlink.net

Gustavo R. Martinez, DSW
gmmia@aol.com

Cheryl K. Simpson-Whitaker, MSW
bchome2@earthlink.com

Fiona M. Patterson, DSW, ACSW
fpatters@zoo.uvm.edu

NASW STAFF

Leticia Diaz, MSW
ldiaz@naswdc.org

The international arena is again coming to the forefront for our association. Through the leadership of NASW President Terry Mizrahi and the encouraging support of the Board and the current NASW Executive Director, Betsy Clark, our committee was reactivated late last summer, directly before the frightening events of September 11. Two articles on international social welfare issues will be featured each month on the NASW Web site. The old articles will be catalogued, so those who start reading the newsletter after a few months will be able to retrieve any article of interest. Upcoming articles will include an International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) update by Michael Cronin, an interview with Cheryl Franks of CUSSW on their international social welfare field of concentration, an update by Kathleen Borland on the extensive Illinois Chapter exchange activities with several other countries, and much more.

Our committee members are Harriet Lancaster, ACSW, chair from Maryland and now Florida; Gustavo Martinez, DSW, Texas; Diane Falk, PhD, LCSW, currently from New Jersey; Cheryl Simpson-Whitaker, MSW, currently from Pennsylvania, and Fiona Patterson, DSW, ACSW, currently in Vermont. Our NASW staff person is Leticia Diaz, MSW, who has a lot of international development experience. (committee's charge can be found at <http://www.socialworkers.org/governance/cmtes/iac.asp>)

The committee members, all experienced in the area of international social work, hope to help NASW members interested in the international arena make appropriate connections with each other. In addition, the events of 9/11 and subsequent scenarios have also stimulated us to encourage all members of NASW to take particular note of the many unmet human needs in much of the rest of the world. None of us has the luxury anymore of only focusing on our needs at home. So many of us see our country as a generous provider of aid to the rest of the world. However, as a provider of aid to other countries we are on the bottom tier of the world's givers, with a very tiny percentage of our gross national product actually going for either development or humanitarian aid. As we struggle at home to see that our clients needs are met, those working in international welfare and development efforts are similarly struggling. Being aware of this has made our committee eager to stimulate social workers, with all of their many useful skills and relevant experience, to think about the international arena.


To that end we have taken a number of steps. Soon after the September 11 terrorist attacks, we worked with the NASW Peace and Social Justice Committee and the National Committee on Ethnic and Racial Diversity to produce a combined statement of our concerns and a call to our membership, which was approved by the NASW Board and posted on the Web site early in January 2002.

As a committee we have put together a work plan, which includes helping social workers make connections for jobs, research, internships, and so forth in the international arena. Working with chapter international committees and helping to develop additional committees is also a high priority for us. Our recent survey shows there are at least six active committees, and at least six more chapters indicated an interest in possibly forming an international committee in the future. We would like this newsletter to become an opportunity to exchange program ideas and updates on chapter international committee activities.

Our committee took an active part in NASW's International Day program on February 1 and 2, 2002, as reported on the front page of the March 2002 *NASW News*. The article included excellent quotes from speaker Terry Hokenstad, who is a representative of the International Association of School Social Workers at the U.N. and also holds a U.N. advisory position on aging. NASW President Terry Mizrahi, in her opening address, set the tone by relating her own intellectual and emotional odyssey in coming to terms with the importance of the international arena, which she called a context, not a specialty, per se. IFSW Ambassador and former NASW President Suzanne Dworak-Peck and IFSW Vice President called on NASW to revitalize its leadership of IFSW, which represents a half million social workers in 77 countries. Michael Cronin, IFSW representative to the U.N. also updated us on his group's activities with the U.N. on behalf of social workers. A number of the areas of concern and interest raised by our fellow social workers to our committee over the past six months were echoed at International Day programs.

Many U.S. social workers are actively involved in international work; others are very interested in becoming involved. Finding other social workers with this international focus as well as internships or job opportunities, overseas or domestic, that focus on the international context is far from easy. However, jobs do exist. Many of these jobs are nontraditional, and social workers need to think about how to display their skills to obtain the kind of work in the international context that they are interested in and are capable of doing. For example as part of my own nontraditional career in the U.S. Peace Corps and at the U.S. Department of State, I was able to use all of my community organization training. Empowerment skills are much needed within the various bureaucracies that work in the international arena.

Increasingly, social work educators are recognizing that the international arena is a critical focus for social work. The academic credential process now requires a social work curriculum focus in the international arena. Some schools of social work are developing not just a course or two but whole international areas of concentration. One of the articles included in this newsletter is about this developing and exciting new educational approach. CSWE has a large and very active international committee. Also, an electronic network has been established between directors of bachelor-level programs who are interested in exchanging information and ideas on the international arena. All of these developments in social work education indicate that our younger professionals will eventually demand from their professional association more support, more networking, and more information with an international focus. We need, as an association, to prepare ourselves!

We want to hear from you about what you would like to see happen in the international area and what you would like to see featured on intermittent Web-based newsletters. Please feel free to e-mail me as your international committee chair at hjlanaster@aol.com. 

Active Chapter International Committees

Harriet L. Lancaster, ACSW, LCSW

NASW needs active chapter international committees! Only a half dozen chapters currently have active international committees. It is easy for U.S. social workers to be insular when it comes to the social welfare needs of the rest of the world. We are well aware of our own problems, including economic equity, social welfare, addiction, psychological disorders, and other social issues that make up the myriad needs of our clients. Except for the limited number of social workers whose professional lives or families connect them to international issues, most of us feel we have more than enough problems at home, which take up both our professional and personal energies.

For many this attitude has changed with the events of September 11, 2001. We tend not to see ourselves as the bad guy and are more than a bit surprised and upset that there are others in the world who see us as the cause of or, at least, a compounding factor in the world's human misery. Events are forcing us to look more closely at the rest of the world and our role in it. We can no longer deny how connected we all are. Books on Islam and the Moslem countries of the world can now be found in discount stores like Costco's, a new phenomena of Americana.

As social workers, we know the impact immigration has had on our caseloads and work life. We are struggling with what makes an effective social worker when working across racial, cultural, and ethnic lines. NASW recently published *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*, work done under the auspices of NCORED,

the National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity. Many of us are involved in a lifelong learning effort to improve our competencies in this area.

What else can we do?

Meeting by telephone the committee has come up with a number of work items that they are now engaged in launching. The committee is surveying chapters to find out what chapters are doing in the international arena and to set up an exchange among chapters as well as with the national office and national-level committee on their work. We are also working on maintaining the e-newsletter and establishing a listserv for those interested in international social work.

We are also exploring grant possibilities in a variety of areas, using our vast social work experience in a number of areas to help both here and overseas, such as working with the effects of posttraumatic stress syndrome, AIDS/HIV and providing tool kits for establishing or developing national associations of social work in other countries. We hope to also strengthen NASW's overseas job and internship opportunities by linking with information from other social work and social development groups. The committee supports the current efforts by NASW and the Canadian Association of Social Workers for closer collaboration and look forward to having opportunities to assist or participate in future developments. This is an important step, because our two countries make up the North American division of IFSW.

The work continues! Here is an example of the Minnesota chapter's recent international committee activity. (This was part of a flyer for a brown-bag luncheon.)

"Social workers and other helping professionals are shocked by the terrorist acts of September 11th. Within Minnesota's communities different ethnic and religious groups perceive and respond to worldwide terrorist acts in different ways. This one and a half-hour brown bag seminar presents information about how one immigrant group in the Twin Cities, Somalis, have responded to these war-like acts. Special attention is given to how Somali leaders respond and the role they play as healers in the community. Attention is also given to how helping professionals throughout the state of Minnesota can be a mitigating factor in both the prevention and treatment of widespread community damage."

Already, as members of the International Committee, we are getting inquiries and information on international social work opportunities. We welcome membership ideas on what else the national committee should be focusing on in the next two years.

On the local level, social workers have much to offer each other in this highly interconnected world of ours. Let's start chapter-level committees in states where we do not have them now! 🌐

Chapter International Committees: What Do They Do?

Diane S. Falk, Chair, NASW-New Jersey International Committee
Social Work Program Coordinator, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

NASW first established the national International Activities Committee in 1986. One of the functions of this committee (now known as the International Committee) is to "maintain liaison with allied organizations," such as local chapter international committees. The national committee is now in the process of gathering information on how many chapter international committees are currently active and what activities they are pursuing—as an essential first step in renewing its liaison with those committees.

Five years ago I examined this same question. During my tenure as president of the New Jersey Chapter of NASW, I decided to re-establish an international committee for the chapter. Although I had some ideas about what such a committee might undertake, I wanted to examine the experiences, both positive and negative, of other chapter international committees. My immediate purpose in gathering this information was to present it at a workshop on international social work at the Chapter's Continuing Education Conference in March 1997. I developed a brief questionnaire and obtained a list from the national NASW office of contact people from all known chapter

international committees. This article presents a summary of the results of that survey, in the hopes that it will help NASW identify any trends in the development and vitality of chapter international committees.

In February 1997 I sent out a letter and questionnaire to contact people from the 14 chapters that were identified by national NASW as either having current international committees or having had international committees in the recent past. These chapters were as follows: Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York City, New York State, North Carolina, Oklahoma, New Jersey, Virginia, and International. (The International Chapter is a small chapter composed mainly of social workers who are living and working abroad.) The letter explained my interest in re-establishing an international committee in New Jersey and my intent to offer a workshop on international social work at the New Jersey chapter's March 1997 Continuing Education Conference.

There were four questions. The first question suggested a number of possible activities and asked respondents to indicate which activities their committee had undertaken. It also gave respondents an opportunity to add activities that had not been mentioned. The other three questions were

- How long (approximately) has your chapter had an international committee?
- Approximately how many people are active participants in the committee?
- Based on your experience, what do you think are the most meaningful activities in which a chapter international committee can participate?

The questionnaire had suggested 12 possible activities in which committees might have engaged. The most common activities reported were educational—sponsoring educational events (79 percent) and writing articles for chapter newsletters, (78 percent) promoting participation in international conferences (67 percent), and participating in videoconferences on international topics (33 percent). Another common activity was identifying chapter members who had international interests, experiences, and skills. Sixty-seven percent of respondents indicated that they had identified members who had professional international interests or had worked internationally, and 44 percent had identified social workers who are bilingual/bicultural. A significant number of chapters had participated in international exchanges (67 percent), including the organization of a “twinning project” (a more formally organized international exchange that is intended to be of some duration). Fifty-six percent of chapters indicated that they had participated in some exchange of knowledge or technology. The next most common activity was advocacy, such as working on international human rights issues (56 percent), working on policy issues related to immigration, immigrants, and refugees (56 percent), or participating in projects to protect the rights of social workers around the world (22 percent).

Additional activities reported by chapter international committees included the following:

- Supervising social work students placed at the United Nations
- Teaching a social work class at the United Nations
- Participating as board members of international social work organizations (such as the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Council on Social Welfare)
- Obtaining international grants
- Presenting at international conferences
- Organizing and attending summer study abroad
- Reporting back on the U.N. Beijing Conference
- Raising funds to create a scholarship fund for Latin American students studying for a social work degree in Honduras
- Holding an annual hunger banquet to raise money to fight world hunger
- Exchanging information on the Internet
- Sponsoring resolutions on human rights, immigration, and violence prevention at Delegate Assembly
- Cosponsoring international conferences with twinning partner (Jamaica)
- Having citizens of different countries on the Chapter Board (International Chapter)
- Inviting social workers from other countries to attend the chapter conference
- Attempting to link up with professional associations of other countries
- Participating in demonstrations against American companies that exploit foreign labor.

At the time of the survey, the median age for a chapter international committee was nine years. The oldest committee had started 11 years ago; the youngest was five years old. One committee indicated that it was currently inactive. The largest committee indicated that it had 20 to 30 members, whereas the smallest had only four. One committee indicated that it had 10 to 15 members but had hosted special programs in which up to 150 people had attended.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this brief survey was the enthusiasm with which respondents wrote. In an attempt not to burden people, I had designed a rather short, simple questionnaire, which could have been answered with check-offs and one-line responses. Instead, people wrote in the margins and on the back of the pages, and several wrote letters expanding on their comments. Respondents were particularly eager to share their ideas about what were the most meaningful activities for an international committee. Here are some excerpts from the responses to that questionnaire:

Global exchange—technology transfer—we have so much to learn from other nations!!! I believe that the internet has opened a new world of opportunities for international social work. . . . I am convinced that developing nations have so much to teach us. I am amazed by the survival skills of people whose countries have been literally destroyed by war and natural disasters.

The twinning project has been particularly meaningful.

Learning about developing countries; connecting with people there. Learning about local refugee communities and doing something to help. Being a conduit for information/people in our area. Doing advocacy work in the face of unconscionable cuts in government assistance to legal refugees and immigrants.

[Developing an] awareness of international problems.

The personal exchange has meant a great deal. . . . We have had one social worker from Scotland present at our annual meeting, and we continue to exchange information.

Projects with clear goals and achievable outcomes are very helpful in focusing (and stimulating) energies, for example, arranging workshops, coordinating “actions,” such as demonstrations at the GAP (against sweatshop labor conditions in Central America), or the Violence and Development Project.

Five years ago there appeared to be tremendous vitality within the relatively few chapter international committees. The data is not in yet on how many chapters have such committees now and what those committees are doing. In this post-September 11 era, it is increasingly clear that a global perspective is essential for the social work profession. If we are not looking beyond our borders, we may be missing some very important information about the social forces affecting our social welfare policies and our clients’ lives. Hopefully this article will promote an exchange of information and ideas between NASW’s national and local international committees. 🌐