Deprofessionalization and Reclassification

BACKGROUND

“Of the 375,000 positions that are classified as social work jobs, only 33 percent are filled by persons with graduate social work degrees and 15 percent are held by persons with the BSW [bachelor’s of social work]. Over one-half of the current social work labor force does not have social work training” (NASW, 1991, p. 204). In 1983, Carol Meyer cautioned: “In every field of practice, on every level of government, and in the voluntary sector, the declassification of professional social work positions has become a dismal reality” (p. 419). More than 15 years later, deprofessionalization and reclassification continue to pose a formidable challenge for social workers in all practice fields.

Early in the 1980s, NASW (1984) undertook a major study to investigate the dynamics of this problem. The final report noted that an “ever increasing number of public social service agencies and private social service providers have undertaken revisions to their personnel system so that preference has no longer been given to job applicants who have social work training” (p. 1). Other investigators reached similar conclusions (Gilbert, 1975; Ginsberg, et al., 1989; Kahn, 1981; Karger, 1983; Pecora & Austin, 1983).

Deprofessionalization and reclassification are the result of reduction in the standards of professional education and work-related experience for social services jobs (Pecora & Austin, 1983). Kahn (1981) described it as a trend that results in “reduction in educational requirements for entry level jobs, assumption of interchangeability of bachelor’s degrees, reorganization of jobs to reduce educational requirements, non-recognition of the exclusivity of bachelor’s or master’s of social work (BSW and MSW) skills, and equating education with experience” (p. 3).

At times, under various deprofessionalization and reclassification schemes, public and private agencies have created generic job classifications, such as clinical case manager, case management specialist, and social services worker that eliminated the title of social worker. The combined effect of the deprofessionalization and reclassification movement has been civil service systems that permit hiring of unqualified and uncredentialed individuals for social work positions. Another consequence has been the eradication of chief social worker positions and functions in major agencies and departments.

Several investigative reports support the position that social work education provides the beginning-level practice knowledge and skills necessary for entry-level positions and that experience alone is an unreliable indicator of job performance (Gilbert, 1975; Karger, 1983). In addition, a relevant study concluded that graduate social work education is the best predictor of performance (Booz-Allen & Hamilton, 1987).

Although the importance of social work education has been denigrated, job performance requirements, such as psychosocial assessment, treatment planning, and discharge planning, have remained unchanged. Paraprofessionals, counselors, or human services personnel often are considered as trained “social workers” and are, at times, sanctioned to function under the title “social worker.” As such, these noncredentialed personnel are held responsible for delivering social services although they lack the social work knowledge base, skills, and values necessary to perform such tasks.
Because public and private sector employers continue to hire unqualified staff personnel to perform complex social services tasks, the social work profession must develop forceful solutions and strategies to reverse this trend. To do so will require a thorough understanding of the dynamics of deprofessionalization. This analysis must focus on factors external and internal to the social work profession, as well as on the value of social work education. Some external factors include the relaxation of social services standards, at both the state and federal levels; reduction in federal and state funding for social services programs; radical changes in personnel policies; and the diminishing number of social workers in administrative and policy-making positions. Increasingly, people from other human services disciplines are competing with individuals who have bachelor’s and master’s degrees in social work for jobs that once exclusively required social work education.

Internal factors to the profession include the redefinition of tasks and responsibilities by specialty groups and a preference by social workers for employment in private agencies. Social workers once flourished in fields such as health care, criminal justice, mental health, and public education. Because of deprofessionalization and reclassification, these positions are less prevalent. Increasingly, due to the results of deprofessionalization and reclassification, workers with MSWs are less attracted to public social services departments. Many new MSW graduates prefer direct practice in private agencies, and the drive for pay equity has pressed social workers in mental health agencies into accepting the title of mental health therapist (Meyer, 1983).

Trends in social work education indicate that students interested in social policy, social research, or social services administration choose other professional degrees, and workers with MSWs often must enroll in doctoral programs to specialize. As a result, non-social workers occupy decision-making positions and make policies that affect the status of social workers and social work practice.

Since 1981, NASW has enhanced its capabilities to address deprofessionalization and reclassification. First, NASW has intensified legislative capabilities and lobbying activities at state and federal levels, resulting in the achievement of landmark legislative goals with the inclusion of social workers as payees under Part B and other sections of Medicare and the establishment of standards for social services staffing in nursing facilities. In addition, NASW has blocked legislation in some states that would have required social workers to obtain other professional licenses and certifications to practice in areas traditionally within their scope, such as family therapy. In 1993, NASW also helped expand vendorship opportunities for social workers in North Carolina. With the establishment of the automatic check-off for the Political Action for Candidate Election fund, NASW has further increased its legislative effectiveness and political clout.

Also, NASW has strengthened its research capacity by establishing the National Center for Social Policy and Practice. Research efforts include determining the relative efficacy of social work training and making widely available research reports such as the Maryland Social Work Services Job Analysis and Personnel Qualification Study (Booz-Allen & Hamilton, 1987).

Finally, NASW increasingly has demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting the social work profession by assuming a leadership role in the social policy and political arena. Since NASW designated social work licensing a high-priority action, all states have established some form of licensing or regulation. In addition, NASW has supported projects in North Carolina and South Carolina to increase the number of trained staff in child welfare. Nevertheless, the solutions and the strategy to counteract deprofessionalization and reclassification continue to elude the profession.

**ISSUE STATEMENT**

Legislators have failed to recognize the social work profession as a major contributor to effective social services and as an advocate for social welfare policies and programs in the United States. Systematically, social workers are being eliminated from direct services, supervision, policy making, and administrative positions. This elimination is being accomplished by deprofessionalizing and reclassify-
ing traditional social work positions in public and private sectors.

Increasingly, public and private employers are hiring staff members who are uncredentialed, inadequately trained, and not qualified to fill social work positions. This trend is a result of the sociopolitical climate of downsizing; the devolution of the role of government; cost-containment in health and mental health services through managed care; and competition with allied professions for direct services, and supervisory and administrative positions.

Many of these individuals, hired as a result of deprofessionalization and reclassification, lack social work practice knowledge, values, and skills, yet are required to perform such complex tasks as psychosocial assessment, treatment planning, interviewing, and acting as change agents. The national trend is to consider work experience or undifferentiated college education as equivalent to social work education. This equivalence assumes that people without social work degrees have the knowledge and intervention skills necessary to help individuals and families deal with complex problems. Such staffing trends are equally harmful to clients and to the social work profession. It is critical to the protection of clients and to the survival of the profession that this national deprofessionalization and reclassification trend be reversed.

The NASW policy statement on declassification, originally adopted by the 1981 Delegate Assembly, identified several contributing factors that have eroded the legitimacy and sanctioning of social work positions (NASW, 1991). The following factors were listed:

- Because there are insufficient numbers of persons with BSWs and MSWs and/or a lack of interest in employment of these individuals in public services agencies, vacancies are filled by untrained staff with undifferentiated undergraduate degrees, causing agencies to emphasize on-the-job training.

- State employee unions have emphasized promotion based on experience and do not support professional education.

- Legislation and administrative rules have allowed other educational degrees and work experience to serve as the equivalent of social work education.

- Fewer resources and budget cuts have led to a justification to lower social work standards and to fill jobs with less-qualified personnel who fit lower salary standards.

**POLICY STATEMENT**

Professional social workers possess the specialized knowledge necessary for an effective social services delivery system. Social work education provides a unique combination of knowledge, values, skills, and professional ethics that cannot be obtained through other degree programs or by on-the-job training. Furthermore, social work education adequately equips its individuals with skills to help clients solve problems that bring them to public and private human services agencies.

In any social services delivery system, NASW affirms and distinguishes between the roles of preprofessional workers and those with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in social work. Promotional opportunities and advancement to positions of greater responsibility and more complex tasks must be based on levels of social work education, experience, and competence. Social workers also must have promotional opportunities, including policy-making and administrative positions.

NASW supports services delivery that adheres to the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999) and emphasizes client interests and dignity (Brager & Holloway, 1978). NASW supports clients’ rights to expect and to receive a high standard of professional services. Under the equal protection law, clients served by both public and private organizations have the right to receive the same quality care provided by trained social workers.

NASW opposes deprofessionalization of social work positions. Deprofessionalization and reclassification jeopardize the quality of social services because unqualified and uncredentialed staff are employed in social work positions. Thus, NASW encourages organizational and public policies that promote the hiring of Council on Social Work Education–degreed social work practitioners and halt the general trend to hire less-qualified staff in times of scarce fiscal resources.
NASW supports the delineation of social work as distinctly different from other human services disciplines (such as counseling, clinical psychology, nursing, marital counseling, and so forth) as it focuses on the intra- and interpersonal aspects of clients’ lives. NASW asserts that the expertise, knowledge, and skills demonstrated by social workers with bachelor’s and master’s degrees should be actively communicated to clients, colleagues, and others at all times. In addition, NASW promotes the identification of tangible social work skills—psychosocial assessment, treatment planning, interviewing, discharge planning, and so forth—that are essential to the social services delivery system.

NASW encourages all employers to provide non-social work employees access to an undergraduate or graduate social work education. Also, NASW encourages schools of social work to offer curriculum content and field instruction relevant to practice (such as that related to child welfare, child and adult protective services, adoption, and income maintenance programs) in public, as well as private, settings.

To empirically validate its policy positions, NASW supports research and outcome studies that demonstrate the effectiveness and cost/benefit of hiring trained social workers. This research promotes the relevance of social work education to the tasks performed in public and private organizations.

Finally, NASW supports title and practice protection for social work in all practice settings and opposes legislation and policies that allow for the practice of social work by individuals without social work education, experience, and competencies.

REFERENCES


Policy statement approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly, August 1999. This statement supersedes the policy statement on Declassification approved by the Assembly in 1993, and the policy statement on Declassification approved by the Assembly in 1981. For further information, contact the National Association of Social Workers, 750 First Street, NE, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20002-4241. Telephone: 202-408-8600; e-mail: press@naswdc.org