AN EVALUATION OF THE ILLINOIS SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
FUNDDED BY TELLIGEN COMMUNITY INITIATIVE
During 2020, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Illinois Chapter (NASW-IL), along with its research partner Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work, examined the conditions of labor shortages of social workers in the state of Illinois and where the mismatches and gaps existed based on the perspectives of social work employers and schools of social work statewide.

Funded by the Telligen Community Initiative (TCI), the evaluation’s main purposes were to:

1. Understand Illinois social work workforce challenges and barriers;
2. Identify specific geographic and areas where shortages of social workers existed;
3. Identify a strategy for improving the current and future social work workforce in the state of Illinois.

The study employed a mixed-method approach by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods with data derived from multi-stakeholders including: employers of social workers from both private and community-based public agencies, leadership from schools of social work throughout the state of Illinois (i.e., deans, directors, and field directors), current social work students, and social workers throughout the state.

During January and February 2020, the social work workforce initiative conducted eight in-person focus groups (n = 34) at the following four, distinct geographic areas, both urban and non-urban, in the state of Illinois:

- January 29, 2020 – Chicago, IL – Loyola University Chicago
- February 6, 2020 – Aurora, IL – Aurora University (western suburbs of Chicago)
- February 12, 2020 – Urbana, IL – University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign School of Social Work (central Illinois)
- February 28, 2020 – Carbondale, IL – Southern Illinois University School of Social Work (southern Illinois)

Two online surveys were sent out, one in mid-April to social work students within the NASW-IL membership, and a second in mid-June to all non-students in the NASW-IL membership.

Respondents identified seven practice areas they believed were experiencing social work workforce shortages:

1. Child welfare
2. School social work
3. Disability
4. Older adults
5. Early childhood
6. Mental health
7. Hospital social work

Factors around Illinois social work workforce challenges were clustered around five categories:

1. Social work workforce recruitment challenges
2. Social work workforce retention challenges
3. Social work workforce challenges in rural areas
4. Social work diversity challenges
5. New hires challenges

The face-to-face focus groups took place immediately preceding the COVID-19 outbreak while online surveys took place in June 2020. The impact of the dual pandemics of COVID and systemic racism has only reinforced the importance of a strong need for mental health providers such as social workers who remain essential to community well-being and trained to help people address personal and systemic barriers to optimal living.
Summary of Findings on the Social Work Workforce Challenges and Strategies

This evaluation examined the conditions of labor shortages of social workers and where the mismatch and gaps exist based on the perspectives of social work employers and educators. Qualitative data on stakeholder perspectives on this workforce condition were categorized into challenges and strategies. Social work employers and educators converged on many of the challenges, but each also had their respective views on the apparent disconnect in the social work labor market.

The two strategies outlined by the stakeholders broadly encompassed the overlapping areas of identified challenges. First was the general workforce strategies that included strengthening the financial benefits/in-kind incentives (free supervision or training), developing a pipeline for future social workers, and recruiting diverse applicants. Second had to do with innovative social work curriculum strategies that included curriculum strengthening by training students clinically with specialty skills, practicality in applied, on-the-job skills, and flexible employment-pipeline internship experiences with strong partnerships with community organizations and non-traditional sectors. Going forward, it will be important to match employer needs with generalist and clinical training provided in schools of social work across the state.

However, these two strategies, which has to actively involve both the supply and demand side actors in the social work labor market, did not specifically and directly address some of the presented challenges. One might see this as being problematic as neither the employers nor the educators wanting to take on the specifics of the broadly themed challenges as their own strategic responsibility. However, it is likely that the nature of these challenges may not have been seen as possible to yield measurable outcomes by any sole actor in the labor market which is where the the supply-demand workforce gap exists in social work. It is promising to see that there were some core, agreed upon (overlapped) challenges that are at least broadly identified as a joint target and addressed under the two strategies.
Confirmation of the Previous Findings

Findings from the 2020 evaluation confirm an ongoing and urgent concern facing both the social work practice and social work academic communities, that of the need to strengthen the preparation of social workers entering the workforce and ensuring the important role that social work will continue to play in the human services marketplace.

Prior to this current initiative, the NASW-IL convened three Social Work Workforce Initiative summits in 2018, two in the Chicago area and one in central Illinois, bringing together leaders from the social work employment/practice arena and area schools of social work. This statewide initiative grew out of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) National Workforce Initiative’s initial study, “Profile of the Social Work Workforce,” released in fall 2017, as well as a subsequent of the workforce study, “New Social Workers: Results of the Nationwide Survey of 2018 Social Work Graduates.” Those meetings produced a serious dialogue regarding core competency needs for the twenty-first century social work workforce and the difficulties that new hires face coming into the profession. It also established a baseline for the current social work workforce initiative.

Additionally, the 2019 National Academies of Sciences – Engineering – Medicine (NASEM) Consensus Report, “Integrating Social Care into the Delivery of Health Care: Moving Upstream to Improve the Nation’s Health,” reviews the importance of examining the potential for integrating social care services into the delivery of health care with the ultimate goal of achieving better and more equitable health outcomes. The NASEM report stresses the importance of an appropriately staffed and trained workforce, i.e., experts in social care that include social workers.

Both of these extensive studies support our findings and restate the need to strengthen the preparation of social workers entering the workforce.

Opportunities: 2021 and Beyond

Meeting these challenges will require a concerted effort on the part of major stakeholders, some of whom were involved in this study—Illinois schools of social work, employers, state agencies as well as elected officials. Efforts need to be made to connect these and other stakeholders to address the challenges and demonstrate the diverse roles of the social work profession can play across the state. This is where stakeholders can help bring these strategies together as opportunities for investing in the future growth of the social work profession and promoting social work—centered hiring, leadership for diversity, and inclusive workplace culture development.
Recommendations for Illinois

To help Illinois support its most vulnerable citizens in need of services, we make the following recommendations to the state:

Promote the social work profession as a key component of the state’s mental health workforce

Expand the pipeline of qualified and diverse individuals to enter the social work profession through higher education tuition support

Work with employers and state agencies to promote a diverse human service, health, and mental health workforce by hiring social workers as organizational leaders who reflect the consumers of human services

Support employers to provide incentives to reflect the important role that social work can play in strengthening services in rural Illinois

Social work is at a crossroad to assume its mission to be the next leader in social innovation in the space of interprofessional and interdisciplinary intersections. Together with stakeholders across the state, we can rise to the challenge of being the proactive leader in bringing all helping professions and professional teams together to holistically tackle the most pressing issues of our new, post-COVID world.

This includes the commitment to focus on the following major needs as identified by the evaluation:

1. Career professional preparation
2. Commitment to diversifying the social work workforce
3. Continued commitment to elevating the importance of the social work profession, its values, and image, and by removing barriers to social work licensing

Social workers and the social work profession continue to be essential—essential to community well-being and trained to help address personal and systemic barriers to optimal living. The profession is poised to meet the most pressing issues of our new, post-COVID world, as leaders of human-centered care coordination for health, mental health, social and economic integration, and equity at all levels of our social fabric. This is ultimately what we should strive for in the entire state of Illinois.

To achieve these goals and to build upon the data generated from the 2020 study, we will be working with the following stakeholders to build upon the data generated from this study:

- Illinois schools of social work;
- social work employers;
- national NASW office and state chapters across the country; and,
- state-elected officials

Social workers and the social work profession continue to be essential—essential to community well-being and trained to help address personal and systemic barriers to optimal living. Social workers are employed to effect positive change with individuals, families, groups, and entire communities. The profession is poised to meet the most pressing issues of our new, post-COVID world, as leaders of human-centered care coordination for health, mental health, social and economic integration, and equity at all levels of our social fabric.
“We need bilingual workers throughout the state where there’s a large percentage of Spanish speaking families.” — social work educator

“We need greater flexibility in social work field placements that accommodate working students and could include paid internships” — social work employer

“We need to hire social workers who understand integration of care and collaboration” — social work employer

“We need the workforce pipeline to begin in high school” — social work educator

“Support employers to provide incentives to reflect the important role that social work can play in strengthening services in rural Illinois”

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Full report available on the NASW-IL Chapter website: naswil.socialworkers.org