



A Strategic Plan to Increase the Flow of Minority, Bilingual and Culturally Competent Professional Social Workers into California's Mental Health System:

## FOCUS GROUP AND KEY INFORMANT FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICY BRIEF

September 2007

*Under the direction of:*

**James Midgley, Ph.D.**

Harry and Riva Specht Professor  
School of Social Welfare  
University of California, Berkeley

**Edward Cohen, Ph.D.**

Director, Center for Social Services Research  
School of Social Welfare  
University of California, Berkeley

The shortage of diverse, bilingual and culturally competent mental health personnel able to staff California's community mental health services is widely recognized. This policy brief provides an overview of findings from focus groups and key informant interviews with California social work educators, managers, practitioners and students. Key themes emerging from the data in the areas of recruitment and retention of a culturally diverse mental health workforce are reviewed and recommendations for strategies for improvements in these areas are highlighted.

### METHODOLOGY

Two methods of data collection were used for this project: focus groups and key informant interviews. Six focus groups were held with social work educators, ethnic minority mental health providers, ethnic minority social work students, staff from agencies that serve ethnic minority populations and community college educators (see Table 1). A structured question guide was developed and piloted with UC Berkeley faculty. The guide focused on three central issues: recruitment and the decision to pursue a social work education, educational success, and workplace and career issues. Graduate student researchers conducted the focus group sessions under the supervision of Dean James Midgley, Principal Investigator. Each session was audiotaped and partial transcriptions were prepared which

highlighted key themes and quotes. The final field report was organized around the central themes identified.

Building on information obtained in the focus groups, 11 key informant interviews were conducted with 12 participants. Using a semistructured interview guide similar to that used for the focus groups, the interviews were conducted by telephone and conversations were audiotaped and partial transcripts were prepared. Much of the findings from key informants mirror those from the focus group participants. Key areas of difference appear to be related to the different perspectives created by management responsibilities.

*Funded by:*



**TABLE 1: FOCUS GROUPS CONVENED**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Date Convened</i>	<i>Number of Participants</i>
Pilot Group (UC Berkeley Faculty and Staff)	June 9, 2005	5
Asian Mental Health Providers	August 15, 2005	8
Multi-Ethnic CBO Mental Health Supervisors	August 30, 2005	6
Community College Mental Health Educators	September 15, 2005	2
Undergraduate Social Work Faculty and Staff	October 10, 2005	6
MSW Social Work Students	November 14, 2005	4

**RECRUITMENT OF CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS TO SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS FOR MENTAL HEALTH**

The following topics were identified in the focus group sessions as barriers that keep ethnic students from entering social work programs:

- Lack of knowledge about social work careers;
- Negative perceptions and misperceptions about social work careers;
- Lack of ethnic role models within the profession;
- Financial constraints;
- Needs of students from diverse backgrounds;
- Confusion regarding college and graduate school application processes;
- Pressure to pursue higher status options for those ethnic students enrolled in California’s colleges and universities; and
- Overlooked opportunities to recruit undergraduate social work students into social work graduate programs and careers

There was a surprising degree of convergence between the views of focus group participants and key informants on most of the key issues reported here.

Participants cited a lack of information and even negative information about the field of social work as a major challenge to expanding the ranks of the profession. The profession’s public image is

fragmented, unclear and often negative in part due to the variety and scope of what social workers do and in part due to media portrayals. There are few portrayals of social workers to rival the positive images of doctors, lawyers and psychologists. Those examples that do exist are more likely to show negative stereotypes; as one participant said: “they always show us taking babies away and as being underpaid and overworked.”

Negative images of social work may in part be due to the field’s tradition of service to the poor, disenfranchised or otherwise vulnerable populations. Participants argue that as long as these negative perceptions persist, social workers will also be cast in a negative light. Misperceptions and negative associations regarding social work and mental health careers may also be more prevalent within specific ethnic communities. These include low status and pay; cultural biases against the mentally ill and mental health treatment; and distrust of social workers and mental health professionals due to a history of racism, bias and mistreatment in the mental health, child welfare and social services systems.

Another difficulty in recruiting potential mental health social workers, identified by several key informants, is that there are many misperceptions

regarding the variety of work within the mental health professions. Informants noted that too often there is a one-size-fits-all view of mental health professionals with little understanding of the different perspectives that social work and other mental health disciplines bring to mental health work.

Another issue identified by participants is that those who help young people choose a career, such as guidance counselors and family, often lack information about social work as a prospective career. Participation in community service activities by high school students is on the rise, yet students and the general public do not associate volunteer experiences with the kind of work performed by social workers. Community service activities with social work career opportunities should be linked to encourage prospective students to consider the field.

In describing their own career paths, participants described serendipitous pathways to social work education. Those who began with a career in mental health in mind typically began by pursuing psychology coursework and then discovered social work to be a better fit to their interests. The personal stories of participants highlight the importance of mentors, teachers and seasoned social workers in influencing decisions to choose social work careers.

Promoting ethnic minority role models and mentors may serve to counteract negative perceptions. Formal and informal programs exist to increase the visibility of ethnic social work practitioners and faculty and encourage mentoring and career development activities. However, university faculty and staff cited downsides to these programs. Participation is often an extra burden on top of other work duties, as practitioners may be saddled with extra assignments, clients and

committee duties without commensurate reduction of other responsibilities. This creates acute dilemmas for ethnic faculty and staff. Those students who do begin to consider a social work education may be deterred by its cost. Financing an education is particularly challenging for poorer students, first-generation college students and those who contribute to the financial support of their families. The application process for financial aid and scholarships and the process of maintaining academic financial accounts can also be overwhelming for some students. Several issues regarding financial aid and student debt were identified by the focus groups. The first and most often mentioned is that financial aid payments may not be sufficient to cover costs of education and living expenses in many California communities. Embarrassment may lead some students to hide their need for help if they lack the money to continue their education. Once the degree is completed, loan repayment burdens may hinder graduates from serving their own communities through community-based organizations (CBO), which typically have lower pay scales than county or other social work jobs.

Beyond costs, the education system is also difficult to access and navigate for those students with significant family responsibilities. Participants mentioned paraprofessional mental health providers and women returning to the workforce as their children reach school age as two potential pools of new bilingual and ethnically diverse social workers. Such nontraditional students were described as facing several significant challenges in becoming social workers, including time and geographic constraints, math and writing ability and financial concerns. The lack of part-time social work programs was cited as very problematic for such students.

The application process for undergraduate and graduate social work programs is another challenging area cited by participants. They note that for many students who are the first in their family to attend college or graduate school, the process seems particularly overwhelming. Few resources exist to help these students complete their applications.

Finally, for those minority ethnic minority students who do make it to college, participants describe family pressures to pursue higher status and higher paying career options. The academic efforts and financial sacrifices that families have made in order for students to attend college may make it difficult to accept that the student will choose a social work career with its attendant low status and low pay. As one participant noted: “Among minority kids, for those who have the smarts to go to school, I think the pressures for them are even harder than for other kids because they are usually exceptional...for them to enter a field that is poorly viewed, poorly understood and poorly paid is very severe. I think we lose a lot of potential candidates this way.”

Despite the aforementioned challenges, a sizable number of ethnic minority students are seeking out social work education at the undergraduate level (see Table 2). Participants noted that this large pool of potential applicants who are interested in pursuing social work education and social work careers are currently being overlooked. One respondent in the undergraduate faculty group reported results from surveys conducted with undergraduate social work majors. When asked about plans for continuing education, about a third of the students reported an intention to apply to graduate social work programs, a third to graduate education programs and the remaining students to other social science (such as psychology) graduate programs and medical school. These results were consistent over surveys to three different cohorts. Clearly, more can be done to engage undergraduates interested in the “helping professions.”

**TABLE 2: ETHNICITY OF BSW STUDENTS BY YEAR IN CSU SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS**

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>2000-2001</i>	<i>2001-2002</i>	<i>2002-2003</i>	<i>Fall/2003</i>
African American	156	155	139	88
Native American	10	10	6	6
Asian/PI American	165	171	176	162
Hispanic/Latino	520	525	493	270
White/Non-Hispanic	391	396	395	279
Multiple	4	0	0	0
Unknown/Other	148	113	130	63
Total Enrollment	1394	1370	1339	868
Total POC	855	861	814	526
% of ethnic students	61%	63%	61%	61%

Source: California Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work, & California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC). (2004). *Master plan for social work education in the State of California*. Retrieved December 20, 2005, from: <http://calswec.berkeley.edu/CalSWEC/Masterplan.pdf>

## RETENTION OF CULTURALLY DIVERSE SOCIAL WORK MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALISTS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND WORK FORCE

### *Barriers to Educational Success*

Focus group participants identified the following themes as barriers to educational success for culturally diverse students in social work education programs:

- Students' readiness to learn;
- Recognition of their own academic problems;
- Isolation and lack of social and peer support;
- Institutional racism; and
- Gaps in academic support for students.

Key informants made comments in the areas of curriculum content and transference of skills from the classroom to the workplace.

The topic of students' ability to succeed in the classroom generated some of the most confrontational discussions in the focus groups. Many participants expressed high expectations of social work education and were critical regarding aspects of their own experience. Educators' responses seemed to reflect a strong desire to support their students while also indicating a frustration with gaps in educational abilities among their students. Educators commented that frequently students do not recognize their limitations and need for assistance until they are quite behind in their studies.

Another issue that negatively impacts students' educational success is isolation. One educator pointed out that many students commute long distances to attend school, limiting their opportunities to build connections. Another observed that large class sizes for undergraduates make it difficult to foster classroom activities and to establish a sense of a class cohort.

Institutional racism was described by participants as corrosive to students' ability and performance. Conservative criticisms regarding the academic ability of ethnic minority students were observed as undermining students' confidence and provoking anxiety about how and why they were admitted into the B.S.W. or M.S.W. program. One student commented that racial bias can extend to field placement, where she sometimes felt out of place as a minority, nontraditional-age social work intern. Ethnic minority social workers and social work students also discussed the sense that race and class issues are often not discussed effectively in the classroom, where discomfort on the part of students and teachers may hinder deep discussion.

Participants debated the best ways to address these issues and provide greater support to students. There were divergent perspectives among faculty and between faculty and students. While there was consensus on the need for academic support, at what point does supportive counseling become therapeutic in nature, and what is the appropriate role of academic advisors, especially given the time-limited nature of current academic support programs? Part-time programs were discussed, which have the benefit of better catering to the needs of working parents, but also have the drawbacks of being poorly structured as students fit classes and fieldwork into their schedule often without logical sequencing of educational activities (e.g., completing field work before introductory practice courses).

Expansion of current B.S.W. and M.S.W. programs is also a challenge, as focus group participants pointed out that caps on enrollment limit growth of programs, and that resources are lacking to expand undergraduate and graduate programs and hire staff to manage part time programs.

After transitioning to the workplace, key informants observed that new graduates may lack adequate training in how to connect research skills and practice skills. There was also concern regarding students' writing skills and their overall understanding of the mental health field. There were also calls to increase students' training in assessment and to improve their understanding of psychological and biological mental health theories.

With regards to the overall education offered by schools of social work, several key informants expressed their opinion that social work training offers unique perspectives for mental health, such as sensitization to the needs of people of color, less emphasized in other mental health training programs. Others expressed a desire that social work education in mental health move away from a medical model and toward a recovery and empowerment model. Although there was little agreement in what changes should be made, each key informant expressed very specific desires to see changes in mental health training and education. These high expectations of schools of social work, coupled with a lack of sufficient uniformity in direction, represents a serious challenge to schools of social work and for the field overall.

#### *Barriers to Workplace Success*

The following barriers affecting workplace success for ethnic minority mental health providers were discussed by focus group participants, many of which are similar to challenges associated with recruiting ethnic minority students into social work programs:

- Negative perceptions of social work;
- The influence of student loan debt and high cost of living on workers career choices;
- County/CBO competition;

- Poor pay and working conditions within mental health programs;
- Inadequate funding of mental health services/negative milieu of mental health workplaces;
- Challenges of recruiting and retaining bilingual, bicultural staff; and
- A perception that job openings do not actually exist. Several of these issues were also discussed by key informants.

Negative perceptions of social work by various ethnic groups are one issue that participants cited as affecting workplace success, because social work may be seen as low-paying and low-status or otherwise connected to cultural biases against mental health treatment. Low pay was indeed an issue some participants described as a barrier to working with ethnic minority clients in community-based organizations. The high cost of living in many parts of California and educational debt can make it difficult to work for a CBO, despite the satisfaction participants derived from their work.

Competition between CBOs and county mental health agencies were described from the perspectives of staff working in both types of agencies. CBO managers expressed the view that there is job "poaching" within the current system: CBOs act as training ground for recent graduates, who then leave for better paying positions within the county systems and private sector institutions such as HMOs. The alternative viewpoint suggests that CBOs need to accept the reality of the marketplace and recognize that part of their role will likely always be as an entryway into the profession and that these agencies need to develop ongoing worker orientation and training programs.

One area where focus group participants seemed to agree is that the current system of county mental health contracting for services has created a two-tier employment system, with tier one employees working for the county and receiving higher salary and better benefits, and tier two employees working for CBOs with lower pay and fewer benefits. CBOs provide most of the specialized services available to ethnic minorities, and can suffer when qualified bilingual and bicultural staff leave their agencies for better pay and benefits.

Difficult work conditions promote turnover in all types of mental health careers. All participants acknowledged that mental health work is hard work, involving “not the greatest working conditions” and “not the most appreciative clients.” Despite the evident need for mental health services for ethnic minorities, budget cuts and reductions in county contracts have resulted in a scaling back of available jobs, according to focus group participants. Qualified bilingual staff may languish without a job if CBOs are unable to access funds to hire more professionals.

Key informants expressed hope that the new funding becoming available through the Mental Health Service Act (MHSA) would help to improve overall conditions within mental health agencies, but also acknowledged some frustrations with aspects of the planning process, including challenges in communication and collaboration among agencies. Supervisors and managers also expressed their frustrations of working through the challenges of supervising unionized staff and trying to find ways to motivate and reward workers who too often feel overworked and underpaid.

## ADDITIONAL ISSUES: COLLABORATION AND SYSTEM CHANGE

Key informants added several new perspectives from those previously obtained with focus group participants, regarding the need for systemic change throughout the mental health education and services field. Most of the key informants were highly motivated and encouraged by recent participation in planning meetings and the success of the MHSA. The main message that was repeatedly discussed by key informants was the importance of collaborative action to create desired transformation in California’s mental health system.

Key informants, many of whom were in management positions within mental health, stressed that the solutions to many of the expressed conflicts, frustrations and problems identified in this research project would require system-wide collaboration. Most noted that their agencies and institutions could not create needed change without working in cooperation with other segments of the mental health field. Interviewees expressed strong desires to see more collaboration system-wide (between schools and the public and private sectors). In particular, there is a strong desire to see more collaborative efforts to recruit, educate and train a diverse work force.

All informants noted difficulties in working with representatives from other institutions. Differences in response time, funding cycles, worker responsibilities, institutional priorities and philosophy were among the main frustrations. With proper dialogue, these tensions can create a stronger and more collaborative system, but many tensions, particularly those related to needs of ethnic minority communities, need more attention.

Those participating in systems change must also take the long view, understanding that real change will take years and involve leadership from the next generation.

Agencies and mental health leaders are looking to social work schools to act as facilitators and leaders in creating systemic change in the mental health field. While there was much criticism of schools of social work and the need to increase students' training, no clear consensus exists on how to achieve the desired changes.

The importance of the CalSWEC model in creating system-wide change was acknowledged by most key informants. The CalSWEC program and its impact on the child welfare system and education and training of future child welfare workers was seen as an important model for the further development of mental health training and curriculum development throughout the state.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus group participants and key informants provided recommendations on ways to improve the recruitment and retention of a bilingual and bicultural work force for the profession and professional associations, schools of social work and faculty, the mental health system and mental health employers and for future research.

*Recommendations for the Profession and Professional Associations (including the National Association of Social Workers, National Association of Black Social Workers, and National Association of Hispanic Social Workers):*

- Develop initiatives to improve the image of the profession and correct misperceptions through collaborations with schools of social work and social work agencies. Focus on building personal connections with young

people, not simply media campaigns.

Encourage involvement of macro-practice social workers and use their skill sets to help develop these projects.

- Develop programs that provide financial support that enable ethnic minority social work staff to act as mentors and recruiters through release time and/or stipends.

### *Recommendations for Schools of Social Work and Faculty—Outreach and Recruitment*

- Develop a “Ladder of Learning,” including stronger linkages between high schools, community colleges, state colleges and university programs. Expand stipend, incentive and work-study programs at the community college and undergraduate levels to encourage recruitment.
- Increase efforts to recruit paraprofessionals, consumers and family members of consumers into undergraduate and graduate programs.
- Establish linkages between schools of social work and certificate programs that allow family members and consumers to move into mental health careers, which will create opportunities for greater professional development.
- Provide more advice and support to potential social work applicants through face-to-face relationships between students in different academic settings (high school to college, community college to four year institutions, undergraduate to graduate programs).
- Develop recruitment efforts to reach ethnic minority students graduating with bachelor’s degrees in social welfare, psychology, sociology and related fields.
- Hold joint application and information sessions with all schools of social work in a given region to enable potential students

to learn about the academic programs and applications procedures for several schools at once and find the right fit for their needs.

- Develop staff positions with authority and responsibility for coordinating community service programs, student outreach programs, mentorships and volunteerships.
- In cross-campus collaborations, advocate for greater resources from the state legislature in order to raise enrollment caps so that greater numbers of ethnic minority students may enroll and graduate from social work programs.

#### *Recommendations for Schools of Social Work and Faculty—Academic Support and Financial Assistance*

- Develop more comprehensive academic support programs.
- Begin promoting the availability of academic support earlier in the term/semester. Help students to identify their own learning needs before it is too late to make corrections.
- Develop projects that build skills and self-esteem of all ethnic minority social work students.
- Develop opportunities for students to complete mental health training without incurring sizeable student loan debt through scholarships, stipends and loan-repayment programs.
- Work in partnership with CBOs to find funding for paid internships.
- Promote greater curriculum consistency across mental health training programs, to allow credit transfers from certificate to BSW to MSW programs.
- Improve the overall quality of cultural competence and general mental health skills training.

#### *Recommendations for the Mental Health System and Mental Health Employers*

- Improve the quality of the mental health workplace through increased pay and better management and supervision.
- Create opportunities for further education and training for paraprofessionals through partnerships with education institutions and mental health agencies.
- Build stronger relationships between ethnic minority providers and ethnic minority communities by encouraging participation in service planning efforts.

#### *Recommendations for System-Wide Collaboration*

- Create collaborations among community groups and schools of social work to become involved in legislative debates about mental health issues. Offer trainings in political advocacy to such groups.
- Develop strategies to decrease the stigma and myths surrounding mental health services to encourage potential mental health professionals to enter the field and potential consumers to make use of services.
- Spearhead mental health actions to create legislation for debt forgiveness programs for practitioners who work with underserved groups.
- Create more accelerated training and job recruitment opportunities within the mental health field to support expansion of services under the Mental Health Services Act. Target CBO staff and current social work undergraduates for recruitment into M.S.W. programs.

### Recommendations for Future Research

- Design research (in collaboration with universities, mental health agencies, community members and consumers) that will evaluate the success and challenges of the MHSA, including outcomes of prevention and demonstration programs and impact of increased participation of people of color, consumers, and family members on the mental health system.
- Improve the timeliness of reporting on research findings so that they have greater relevance to the field.
- Develop feasibility studies and recommendations for development of community-based education programs and part-time social work programs.
- Collect more information about on-the-job training and education programs being developed by county mental health agencies and CBOs.
- Document current social work education projects that address needs of ethnic minority students.
- Investigate the current ethnic makeup of students in social work undergraduate and graduate programs.
- Develop better mechanisms to track graduates of BSW and MSW programs.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was made possible with funding from The California Endowment. The associated study will result in a *Strategic Plan* containing specific proposals for increasing the flow of minority, bilingual and culturally competent social workers into the mental health system in California.



*Under the direction of:*

**Center for Social Services Research**

**School of Social Welfare**

**University of California at Berkeley**

120 Haviland Hall

Berkeley CA 94720

510.642.1899

<http://cssr.berkeley.edu/>

*Funded by:*

**The California Endowment**

1000 N. Alameda Street

Los Angeles, CA 90012

800.449.4149

[www.calendow.org](http://www.calendow.org)

This policy brief is for general informational purposes only. The California Endowment does not warrant the timeliness or accuracy of any information contained in this policy brief. Any use of or reliance upon information contained in this policy brief is entirely at your own risk. Views and opinions of others expressed in this policy brief do not represent those of The California Endowment. This policy brief is protected under U.S. and international copyright laws. You may copy and download this policy brief for your personal and non-commercial use only. All other uses are strictly prohibited.

CPA/MH Strategic Plan-Focus Group Brief

TCE 0703-07