

American Association of Social Workers

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NEW YORK, N. Y.

(Reprinted from *The Compass*, December, 1936)

THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION: FUNCTION AND ACTIVITIES

FOR the first meeting of the Executive Committee last fall the following descriptive statement of the Association's function and activities was drawn up by the Executive Secretary. The immediate objective was to place before the Executive Committee the urgent and long range problems of social work so that the committee might determine the most effective use of the Association's machinery, resources and influence in dealing with these problems during the year ahead. The statement is reprinted here for the use of the membership as a whole since it summarizes in concise form the experience of the Association in recent years as it relates to the kind of organization it is or might be, the range of its concerns and the hypotheses on which it has based its program decisions. It is a summary which draws on social workers' experience as that is reflected in the volume of requests and correspondence of the Association, the records of chapter activities and discussions, and also the discussions and decisions of the Executive and other committees.

The material as presented includes first, certain concepts about social work which affect the function of a professional association; second, a general summary of areas of activities of the Association; and third, a description of the Association resources and the existing machinery through which it operates.

A. SOCIAL WORK AND THE FUNCTION OF THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION.

Some general concepts about social work practice have weighted heavily the development of the Association's activities in recent years. These concepts stem from the beginning of the Association but as they have developed they have been employed to create what is believed to be a more integrated and more purposeful program. These were not adapted consciously as analogies from other professional history but it may be significant that analogies exist suggesting the possibility that they are natural to professional development:

1. Recognition and consistent action on the

hypothesis that the practice of social work requires a considerable body of knowledge. It is like other professional occupations in that successful practice depends almost entirely on a combination of skilled performance built around comprehensive knowledge. It shares with other professions the characteristic that the practitioner must know enough and have discrimination enough and versatility enough to do one or more of many possible things in each instance of practice. It is a kind of practice which has to deal with unknown factors and which has to diagnose and plan.

2. It follows that the only way to employ this combination of knowledge and practice in service is by its embodiment in individuals and through the placing of such persons in positions to practice social work. The value and quality of a social work program is therefore seen to be determined by the extent to which professional personnel is employed.

3. It likewise follows that policy should be derived from practice and should be as free as possible from dictation by external factors. Interference in teaching or medical practice or engineering by political influence or public opinion would be recognized as anti-professional. Social work practice has been slow to liberate itself from external influences inherent in its origins in agencies and categorical controls, and the emergence of essential professional principles therefore has been delayed and their recognition obscured. A professional association provides a channel for this liberation which is not found in the employment relationships of most social workers.

B. ASSOCIATION ACTIVITIES.

Range of Activities. Based on these hypotheses, the scope of the Association's activities is seen to be aimed at the development of available, competent personnel (the problem of professional education); means of identification of competence (professional standards); means by which competent personnel can be selected and utilized; means by which working conditions can be made most favorable to the liberation of competence



(employment practices); interpretation of the facts of social work to the public; channels through which professional experience may be brought to bear on social problems and administrative devices for dealing with those problems (government and social work); the continual conversion of practice experience into greater professional content and transmissible knowledge; activities which build up the Association itself as a means of making the professional personnel of social work a more dynamic factor in the development of professional understanding and practice.

As a matter of fact the problems of social work would define the range of professional concerns as in any other profession. The rapid development of professional activity in social work given special impetus by the spotlight thrown on the personnel of the enlarged public programs (as a contrast to the subordination of the professional personnel factor in the private agency programs) has demanded a sudden broadening and diversification of the professional association's activities.

Form of Activities. What form do the Association's activities take? Some become visible in formulations, publications, public testimony, conferences. On the other hand the main "case load" includes consciousness of ideas in the process of formulation and of application to the professional problems facing the membership through the various stages of correspondence, field visits, committee meetings, and through *Compass* articles, conference papers, chapter bulletins, publications, and official actions. The problems of the membership arise as local matters. A few become general enough to assume national aspects, but even so the direct application is in the terms of social work where it is practiced. The aim of the Association's activities is therefore directed toward the professional activities of the membership through the chapters. The activities are valid in so far as they are demonstrable in practice.

Some of the subjects on which the Association staff and committees have been working are:

1. *Professional Education and Standards.*

Perhaps no subject represents more clearly the variety of the form of professional activities. It is clear that the Association does not conduct a professional school, nor control nor regulate any system of professional education. Still, no other aspect of the total professional problem is involved in so many phases of the Association's work.

As the culmination of several years of discussion about professional equipment, the membership requirements were shifted from experience to education in 1929 to go into effect in 1933. The very considerable influence of these requirements as the possible definition of the social worker was

transferred at that time to professional education. Before and since that date the Association has had ample evidence that a conviction as to the validity of professional education and an understanding of what it implied are needed most within the profession of social work itself. Attitudes toward the large number of emergency workers and other workers in the field without professional equipment, toward the "rank and file" movement, toward the non-professional administrators; attitudes regarding the several fields of social work, problems of employment in various kinds of agencies, current issues regarding the extension of civil service, and so forth, are all daily situations in which a consistent policy regarding professional education is involved.

Too much is known of the history and of the variations in schools of social work to evade the fact that professional education is in its primitive stage and that many of its weaknesses compromise the attempts to base standards on it. Being interested in professional education as the basis of standards and recognizing that the problems of content and method are of vital concern to practicing workers, the Association views as a major part of its program the development of professional education itself. It also has the primary responsibility for furthering the belief in its validity, first in the professional group and then in the community at large.

Professional standards are a part of the everyday load of the Association, to be dealt with in terms of definition, of chapters, agencies, or individual problems. Recognizing that great pressure exists for lower levels of selection in the enlarging public programs, it appears that the resistance of social workers and social agencies is inadequate in the face of this threat to the major administrative responsibility, namely, the selection of qualified personnel. The Association endeavors to keep in constant circulation all the available material on classification, job descriptions, tests, and other facts of importance to methods of selection.

The biographical directory of the membership recently published listing the professional education and experience of social workers serves as tangible evidence that a broad professional basis of activities exists in social work.

This Association began as an organization of persons presumably performing related social services; a selected membership. There immediately developed the problem of determining who was a qualified social worker, and what were the qualities and experiences which provided the equipment for endorsement by the professional Association. The membership requirements in use since 1933 represent the current definition of such qualities and experience. The persistent and increasingly intensive membership work by the Association's staff and committees in apply-

ing the workable and useful basic definition of the qualified worker contained in the membership requirements, has brought returns of great value to the public, as well as to social work and social workers.

Definitions can be increasingly in terms of professional education. Instead of attempting to evaluate experience in terms of the environmental value of an agency's practice, the application of the present membership standards tends toward the more professionally useful methods of appraising the proficiency of the applicant in terms of common educational experience. We may be approaching the time when, instead of judging a worker by the agency which employs him, it will be possible to appraise the agency by the quality of its staff in relation to professional standards.

2. *Employment Practices.*

A consistent thread running through a professional program is that the qualitative development of professional services is in the interest of clients and of the public at large. Unlike some issues in which the "rights" of one group may conflict with the interests of others, the protection of working conditions for a professional group coincides with its serviceability.

Efforts by the Association to secure recognition of the need for stability and security in the employment relationships of social workers are inherent in whatever is achieved in regard to personnel standards. Security, rates of pay, freedom from the interference of arbitrary rulings not in accord with the interests of practice, are in direct proportion to the esteem in which the service is held.

Because of the great degree to which employment relationships affect the performance of a professional service, it is seen to constitute one of the administrative problems in which policy should be most sensitive to practice. The Association's efforts in this area are directed at the general problem of resolving from practice itself, the formulations of policy which the profession can recommend. It finds itself operating in an area, however, where traditional concepts of labor-employer "rights" and "civil liberties" have held sway longer than the professional concept. As in the matter of standards, it finds that the immediate objective is to create a working understanding of the relationship between personnel standards and working conditions on the part of the professional group itself.

Particular activities of the Association in this field have related to: a bibliography, a suggested basis for contractual understanding of employment practices, some suggested norms of reasonable working relationships, the omission of social workers and other employes from insurance provisions of the Social Security Act, retirement plans, and action on grievances and complaints.

3. *The Extent and Nature of Social Services.*

It would seem axiomatic that any profession would have competent testimony on the extent of need for its services, on the problems of clients and on the administrative devices for meeting those needs. In this area, again, traditional factors have obscured the issue both for the social workers and for the public.

The Association has provided a channel now in extensive use by chapters, by national committees, and elsewhere, for converting practice experience into public information. Preoccupation with the vast relief programs which were recognized as basic to development of other social services has resulted in a great degree of concentration of these activities in the past few years on that particular aspect of public services. The work of the Association from its early activity with the Costigan-LaFollette hearings to the present need not be detailed. Present activities of the Division on Government and Social Work include: Continual iteration and argument on need for a general federal assistance program, persistent attempts to clarify issues involved in the present confused situation, and efforts to secure and interpret data bearing on policies.

4. *Interpretation.*

This part of the Association activity begins with its reports to the membership and extends to a wider public as material and means are available. To other resources of the Association, a staff member was added last year to intensify the interpretation of material in hand, and to broaden the field to be reached.

The Compass, into which special efforts have been put during recent years, the Association's Delegate Conferences, some use of national and state conferences, discussion material circulated to chapters, publicity and other distribution for material from the Association's work are the channels which the Association is developing for professional interpretation.

During the past year wide publicity was given the survey of twenty-five states, the New Jersey Relief Study, the Chicago Chapter Study, the Delegate Conference, supplemented by other releases on the relief situation, and a wide range of contacts were made with newspapers, special writers, syndicates, and so forth.

The Association's active publication list includes:

Four Papers on Professional Function; Unemployment and Its Treatment in the United States; This Business of Relief; Directory of Members; Social Case Work, Generic and Specific; Social Work Ethics. Job Analysis Series—The Social Worker in Family, Medical and Psychiatric Social Work (out of print); The Social Worker in Group Work; The Social Worker in Child Care and Protection; Vocational Guidance in Action; The Social Worker in the Prevention and Treatment of Delinquency. Pamphlets—Facts about Personal Standards; Some Points on Professional Standards; A Report on

Group Discussion; Civil Service and Social Work; Professional Protection for the Social Worker; Application of a Voluntary Merit System for Public Welfare Personnel; Relationship of Professional Practice to Professional Education; A Statement about Standard Employment Practices in Social Work; Purpose and Value of Standards in Social Work; An Outline of the Position of the AASW in Respect to Federal Employment and Assistance Programs; Social Work Fellowships and Scholarships; Social Work as a Profession; Social Work as a Career. Retirement Planning in Private Social Agencies; Evaluation: An Important Aspect of Administrative Process.

C. ASSOCIATION RESOURCES AND MACHINERY.

The Association consists of: 10,500 members; 78 chapters, including about 95 per cent of the total membership; six state councils representing the chapters and non-chapter members of these states.

The national officers and the Executive Committee are charged by the By-Laws with administration of the AASW, consistent with actions taken by the membership. The size of membership naturally throws responsibility for practically all management on this Committee. The six elective officers and nine elected members and Chairmen of Standing Committees compose the Executive Committee. An Ad Interim Committee composed of members of the Executive Committee within convenient call of the national office functions for the Executive Committee on matters of accepted policy between meetings of the whole Committee.

A *Nominating Committee* provides a ballot for the use of the membership in electing officers and the Executive Committee.

National Committees to which are delegated by the Executive Committee certain subjects or areas of Association responsibility.

Financial resources amounting to approximately \$89,000 in 1936. Of this amount about \$14,000 is chapter money and the remainder finances the national activities.

The membership voice in the AASW is expressed in the Delegate Conference, and in the election of officers and Executive Committee. Less formal expression comes through contacts with chapters and members, through committees and through correspondence.

A *national office and staff* which carries out the plans made by the Executive Committee assisting the various national committees to function on the work assigned to them, collects and brings before the committees the material bearing on their assignments, develops correspondence and direct contacts with chapters and mem-

bers, publishes *The Compass*, chapter bulletins, etc., and makes contacts of many kinds with other social work agencies, other professional agencies, and with such public interests as bear on social work, and also carries out the heavy routine business required by a selective membership organization. The staff consists of the executive secretary and three assistant secretaries, the office manager, the membership assistant, five secretary-stenographers, a bookkeeper, and two clerks.

Underlying the activities which the national office and committees are able to undertake are the primary functions of keeping a growing selective membership organization together, and in discharging the routine responsibilities incurred by a national office in a profession which has been getting increased national and local attention. Without making a complete list of these office duties, some indication of the volume of routine work essential to such an organization and bearing on its resources is necessary. For instance:

The Association office, following preliminary membership work by chapters, makes a careful check of each application, checking with inactive files, recording qualifications for reference and tabulations, sends for references and school credits, except in chapter territory, checks applications with college and professional school catalogues, and carries on in the case of many applications extended correspondence with the applicant, references, schools and chapters. The process is repeated on applications for reinstatement, and responsibility is also accepted for transfer from junior to full membership.

Approximately 600 changes of address are recorded monthly on the various membership lists required to be kept. Lists of chapter officers and committees are maintained, and reports of chapter activities indexed.

A modest business amounting to \$1,500 to \$2,000 annually is done in publication sales in small accounts.

To collect the Association dues will require approximately 22,000 bills this year, the recording of over 10,000 payments and the naturally detailed bookkeeping required for handling this large number of accounts. Delayed and delinquent payments require monthly sorting of all membership records and special correspondence on delayed payments estimated at approximately 4,000 letters annually. Approximately 2,000 general inquiries about membership, the vocation possibilities in social work, inquiries for literature, etc., are received.

Each transaction involving dues, changes of address, and membership applications requires one or more notifications to a chapter.

