**Roles of Social Workers**

In working with individuals, groups, families, organizations, and communities, a social worker is expected to be knowledgeable and skilful in a variety of roles. The particular role that is selected should ideally be determined by what will be most effective, given the circumstances. The following material identifies some, but certainly not all, of the roles assumed by social workers.

**Enabler**

In this role, a worker helps individuals or groups to articulate their needs, to clarify and identify their problems, to explore resolution strategies, to select and apply a strategy, and to develop their capacities to deal with their own problems more effectively. This is perhaps the most frequently used approach in counselling individuals, groups, and families. The model is also used in community practice primarily when the objective is to help people organize to help themselves.

It should be noted that this definition of the term enabler is very different from the one used in the area of chemical dependency. There the term refers to a family member or friend who facilitates the substance abuser’s continued use and abuse of a drug.

**Broker**

A broker links individuals and groups who need help (and do not know where it is available) with community services. For example, a wife who is often physically abused by her husband might be referred to a shelter for battered women. Nowadays even moderatesize communities have 200 or 300 social service agencies/ organizations providing community services. Even human services professionals may be only partially aware of the total service network in their

community.

**Advocate**

The role of advocate has been borrowed from the legal profession. It is an active, directive role in which the social worker advocates for a client or for a citizens’ group. When a client or a citizens’ group is in need of help and existing institutions are uninterested (or even openly negative and hostile) in providing services, then the advocate’s role may be appropriate. In such a role, the advocate provides leadership for collecting information, for arguing the correctness of the client’s need and request, and for challenging the institution’s

decision not to provide services. The objective is not to ridicule or censure a particular institution but to modify or change one or more of its service policies. In this role, the advocate is a partisan who is exclusively serving the interests of a client or a citizens’ group. In being an advocate, a worker is seeking to empower a client or a citizen’s group through securing a beneficial change in one or more institutional policies.

**Activist**

An activist seeks institutional change; often the objective involves a shift in power and resources to a disadvantaged group. Activists are concerned about social injustice, inequity, and deprivation, and their strategies include conflict, confrontation, and negotiation. The goal is to change the social environment to better meet the recognized needs of individuals. Using assertive and action-oriented methods (for example, organizing concerned citizens to work toward improvements in services in a community for people with AIDS), social workers engage in fact finding, analysis of community needs, research, the dissemination and interpretation of information, mobilization, and other efforts to promote public understanding

and support on behalf of existing or proposed social programs. Social action activity can be geared toward a problem that is local, state wide, or national in scope.

**Mediator**

The mediator role involves intervention in disputes between parties to help them find compromises, reconcile differences, or reach mutually satisfactory agreements. Social workers have used their value orientations and unique skills in many forms of mediation. Examples of target groups in which mediation has been used include disputes that involve divorcing spouses, neighbors in conflict, landlord–tenant disputes, labor–management disputes, and child custody disputes. Mediators remain neutral, not siding with either party, and make sure they understand the positions of both parties. They may help to clarify positions, identify miscommunication about differences, and help those involved present their cases clearly.

**Negotiator**

A negotiator brings together those who are in conflict over one or more issues and seeks to achieve bargaining and compromise to arrive at mutually acceptable agreements. Somewhat like mediation, negotiation involves finding a middle ground that all sides can live with. However, unlike a mediator, which is a neutral role, a negotiator usually is allied with one of the sides involved.

**Educator**

The educator role involves giving information to clients and teaching them adaptive skills. To be an effective educator, the worker must first be knowledgeable. Additionally, she or he must be a good communicator so that information is clearly conveyed and readily understood by the receiver. Examples include teaching parenting skills to young parents, providing job hunting strategies to the unemployed, and teaching anger-control techniques to individuals with bad tempers.

**Initiator**

An initiator calls attention to a problem—or even to a potential problem. It is important to realize that some problems can be recognized in advance. For example, a proposal to renovate a low-income neighbourhood by building middle-income housing units may result in the current residents’ becoming homeless. If the proposal is approved, the low-income families won’t be able to afford the costs of the middle-income units. Usually the initiator role must be followed by other functions; merely calling attention to problems usually does not resolve them.

**Empowerer**

A key goal of social work practice is empowerment, which is the process of helping individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities increase their personal, interpersonal, socioeconomic, and political strength and influence through improving their circumstances. Social workers who engage in empowerment focused practice seek to develop the capacity of clients to understand their environment, make choices, take responsibility for their choices, and influence their life situations through organization and advocacy.

Empowerment-focused social workers also seek to gain a more equitable distribution of resources and power among different groups in society. This focus on equity and social justice has been a hallmark of the social work profession, as evidenced through the early settlement workers such as Jane Addams (see Chapter 2).

**Coordinator**

Coordinators bring components together in some kind of organized manner. For example, for a multiproblem family it is often necessary for several agencies to worktogether to meet the complicated financial, emotional, legal, health, social, educational, recreational, and interactional needs of the family members. Someone at an agency needs to assume the role of case manager to coordinate the services from the different agencies to avoid duplication and to prevent the diverse services from having conflicting objectives.

**Researcher**

Every social worker is at times a researcher. Research in social work practice includes studying the literature on topics of interest, evaluating the outcomes of one’s practice, assessing the merits and shortcomings of programs, and studying community needs.

**Group Facilitator**

A group facilitator is one who serves as a leader for group activity. The group may be a therapy group, an educational group, a self-help group, a sensitivity group, a family therapy group, or a group with some other focus.

**Public Speaker**

Social workers occasionally are recruited to talk to various groups (such as high school classes, public service organizations such as Kiwanis, police officers, staff at other agencies) to inform them of available services or to advocate for new services. In recent years, a variety of needed services have been identified (for example, runaway centers, services for battered spouses, rape crisis centers, services for people with AIDS, and group homes for youths). Social workers who have public-speaking skills can explain services to groups of potential clients.

**What Is Social Work?**

The National Association of Social Work (NASW) defines *social work* as follows:

*Social work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups, or communities enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and creating societal conditions favourable to this goal. Social work practice consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends:*

● *Helping people obtain tangible services (e.g., those involving provision of food, housing, or    income).*

● *providing counselling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups.*

● *Helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services.*

● *participating in relevant legislative processes. (NASW, 1973, pp. 4–5)*

The strengths perspective is closely related to the concept of ***“empowerment.”*** *Empowerment has been defined by Barker as “the process of helping individuals, families, groups, and communities to increase their personal, interpersonal, socioeconomic, and political strength and to develop influence toward improving their circumstances.”*

**What Is Social Welfare?**

What does the term *social welfare* mean? And exactly whose welfare are we talking about? Answers to these questions require critical thinking because, as a citizen and voter, your opinions are vital. You have the opportunity to help determine and shape how you and others are treated, how your own and their welfare is respected and nurtured.

A central theme of this book is encouraging you to think critically about problems, issues, and policies affecting people’s lives and welfare.

*Social welfare* is “a nation’s system of programs, benefits, and services that help people meet those social, economic, educational, and health needs that are fundamental to the maintenance of society”(Barker, 2003, p. 408).

Social welfare, then, is a broad concept related to the general well-being of all people in a society. Inherent in the defi nition are two basic dimensions:

(1) what people get from society (in terms of programs, benefits, and services) and

(2) how well their needs (including social, economic, educational, and health) are being met.

Reid (1995) describes social welfare as “an idea, that idea being one of a decent society that provides opportunities for work and human meaning, provides reasonable security from want and assault, promotes fairness and evaluation based on individual merit, and is economically productive and stable” (p. 2206).

How are social welfare and social work related?

Simply put, *social work* serves to improve people’s social and economic welfare. It does so in the many fields or settings, including health, mental health, and financial assistance, among many others. Populations served include older adults, children and families, people with disabilities, and people involved with the legal system.

Note that social work is not the only field concerned with people’s social welfare. Others include those providing health, educational, recreational, and public safety services. Physicians, nurses, other health care personnel, teachers, park recreational counsellors, police, fire fighters, and many others work to enhance people’s well-being and quality of life.

Social welfare can be quite controversial on two counts. Social work is a knowledge and discipline that is used in the practical field of social welfare. Social welfare is a goal that is achieved by the application of social work knowledge.

One involves individuals’ responsibility to take care of themselves independently of government, which reflects the old saying “You get what you deserve.” The other concerns society’s responsibility to take care of all its members, especially those belonging to oppressed groups. There is constant political debate about what social services should and should not provide, and about who should receive them and who should not.

The following section explores various perspectives that structure how you might think about social welfare. Each addresses the following questions: What should be the most important focus and goals of social welfare? Who should assume responsibility for people’s social welfare?

**Residual, Institutional, and Developmental Perspectives on Social Welfare**

We can look at social welfare and the ways its programs are developed from three different perspectives— residual, institutional, and developmental (Dobelstein, 2003; Gilbert & Terrell, 2005; Herrick, 2008; Segal, 2007; Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1965).

**The *residual* perspective** conceives of social welfare as focusing on problems and gaps. Social welfare benefits and services should be supplied only when people fail to provide adequately for themselves and problems arise. The implication is that it’s people’s own fault if they require outside help. Society, then, must aid them until they can once again assume responsibility for meeting their own needs. Blaming women and children for being “on welfare,” for example, reflects a residual view. The focus is on their supposed failures and faults; they are viewed in a demeaning and critical manner.

**The *institutional* perspective** of social welfare, in contrast, views people’s needs as a normal part of life.Society has a responsibility to support its membersand provide needed benefi ts and services. It’s not people’s fault that they require such services, but rather it is an expected part of the human condition. People have a right to receive benefi ts and services on an ongoing basis. In many ways, this is a more humane and supportive approach to helping people. Public education available to all is an example of an institutional form of social welfare; similarly, fi re and police protection are available to all (McInnis-Dittrich, 1994).

Prior to the Great Depression in the 1930s, the residual approach to social welfare dominated. Since then, however, both approaches have been apparent, depending on the program at issue. Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), described in a later chapter, is an example of a residually oriented program. Families in need receive temporary, limited financial assistance until they can get back on their feet.

**The newest view on social welfare is the *developmental* perspective.** This approach “seeks to identifysocial interventions that have a positive impact oneconomic development” (Midgley & Livermore, 1997,p. 574). It originated after World War II in Third

World countries seeking to design social welfare programs that would also enhance their economic development. This perspective gained impetus in the United States in the 1970s because “it justifi es social programs in terms of economic efficiency criteria” (Lowe, 1995; Midgley & Livermore, 1997, p. 575).

Midgley and Livermore (1997) cite three major ways that economic development can occur in a developmental context.

First, “investments in [services to people such as] education, nutrition, and health care” can be evaluated so that people get the most for their money (p. 577). For example, investments in education may result in a more skilled labor force that, in turn, generates a stronger economy.

Second, investment in physical facilities involving “the creation of economic and social infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, irrigation and drinking water systems, clinics, [and] schools . . . provide the economic and social bases on which development efforts depend” (pp. 577–578). Workers must have a transportation system to get to work and a building

in which to work to get anything done. Therefore, resources expended on developing such things are economically productive.

Third, developing “programs that help needy people engage in productive employment and self-employment” is more economically viable than giving people public assistance payments over years and even decades (p. 578). It is an efficient economic investment to educate and train people in need so that they can get jobs and eventually support themselves.

**Generalist Social Work Practice**

Generalist social work practice has a generic set of assessment, planning, and intervention skills that they and skills in applying the planned change process in diverse settings. It applies skills within ca any system size i.e. macro, mezzo and micro level. The constant theme that runs through all generalist social work practice is a focus on individual well being in a social context and the well-being of society. Generalist practice is the use of a wide range of professional roles, methods the context of professional social work practice.

The focus of undergraduate social work education is the generalist practice perspective. This means the social worker has an eclectic or diverse theoretical base that utilizes a systems framework to assess a variety of points for possible intervention. The core responsibility of social work practice is the guidance of planned change through the problem-solving process. This means social workers recognize that problems can occur at all levels of living (e.g., individual, family, group, and community levels) and that interventions aimed to address these problems can also happen on various levels. Generalist social work practice is broad in scope, and a practitioner can be called on to help a homeless family, a sexually abused child, an agency developing policies to meet new state or federal regulations, a community attempting to develop awareness of substance and alcohol abuse, an elderly person unable to care for him/herself any longer, or to advocate for a teen community center. Generalist social work practitioners can be found in many different settings such as nursing homes, domestic violence programs and shelters, community mental health programs, alcohol and substance abuse facilities and treatment programs, advocacy agencies, crisis centers, prisons, family counselling centers, hospitals and many, many more. Two key qualities for generalist social work practitioners are creativity and flexibility.