



# Rural Social Work

## BACKGROUND

### *Social Work Values and Ethics*

Rural social work practice contributes to the social work mission of advocating for social justice and extending access to services for under-served populations. Rural practice requires a sophisticated level of understanding of values and ethics and highly developed skills in applying them. Small communities pose challenges to confidentiality, particularly when relatively few professional social workers interact with providers and community members who may have limited understanding of professional ethics. Effective rural practice involves locality-based community development. It is frequently inappropriate to maintain "professional distance" from the community. Instead, it is essential to participate in community activities and establish trust among the residents.

Rural social workers interact with clients and their families in a variety of ways, such as at schools, churches, sports events, or fundraisers. Protecting clients from any negative consequences of dual relationships in rural settings has less to do with limiting social relationships and more to do with setting clear boundaries. Discussing possible conflicts and apprising clients of options is essential. However, the general lack of resources limits referral alternatives.

Residents of rural areas can be judgmental toward clients and services that reflect cultures and lifestyles different from community norms. Education of community members requires a sustained effort based on trust. Empowering clients who have limited opportunities can be challenging, but some rural communities provide examples of support and commitment that enhance the services social workers can provide. The professional litera-

ture deals so little with aspects of rural practice that the preparation that all social workers should receive to work in rural communities or with clients from rural cultures is limited.

### *Professional Services and Education*

Rural areas face a shortage of social welfare services to meet their needs. Those services that do exist are further diminished by issues related to professional training among staff (Daley & Avant, 1999; Ginsberg, 1993; NASW, 1994). Agencies often are forced to use high proportions of bachelor's-level social workers who provide needed frontline services but are assisted by large percentages of nonprofessional staff. This practice is less common in nonrural areas (Johnson, 1980). It is common for workers to be isolated from direct professional supervision.

Recruitment and retention issues are, in part, by-products of a social work educational system that developed largely from urban roots and pays relatively little attention to rural populations (NASW, 1994). Most social workers receive little content on rural social work in their professional training. This general lack of preparation creates a major barrier to developing the professional social work labor force needed to address the needs of rural clients and the unique social problems of rural communities.

Most authors agree that generalist preparation is the best approach for rural practice (Daley & Avant, 1999; Davenport & Davenport, 1995; Ginsberg, 1976), yet graduate education tends to force students away from this approach. The appearance of new social work programs in rural areas, some with advanced generalist concentrations, is encouraging. They

create an opportunity to address the shortage of professional social workers in rural areas. The educational challenge that remains is to continue to strengthen the content in rural social work and integrate it in the overall curriculum.

### *Rural Poverty*

Great wealth has been extracted from rural America; yet, it remains the site of some of the nation's most intense and persistent poverty (Rural Policy Research Institute, 1995). People in rural areas experience lower income levels, higher unemployment, and higher poverty rates than people in urban areas. However, public assistance utilization rates are lower because rural residents lack access to program information and because of the stigma attached to public assistance in rural areas (Rank & Hirschl, 1993).

In 1997 the poverty rate in nonmetropolitan counties was 15.9 percent compared with 12.6 percent in metropolitan counties (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Poverty levels in metropolitan areas have slowly decreased but have not gone down in rural areas (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Nonmetropolitan counties have a higher percentage of children in poverty, and more rural children live in female-headed households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Of the 200 consistently poorest U.S. counties, 195 are rural. Twenty-three percent of people in nonmetropolitan counties are considered persistently poor. Studies indicate that the duration of poverty is a strong predictor of school attainment and early patterns of employment (Caspi, Wright, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998; Duncan, Young, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). Children in nonmetropolitan areas who become poor or are born poor are more likely than urban children to stay in poverty; non-metropolitan children in female-headed households are at even greater risk of persistent poverty (Sherman, 1992).

The increasingly global economy and the proliferation of international corporate conglomerates have further transformed the political, social, and economic landscape of rural areas. Rural manufacturing operations relocate to places with cheap labor. Without the training to move to a technology-based economy and with underfunded school systems and limited taxation capacity, even more rural

people are left out of the economic mainstream and remain in or near poverty (Dilger et al., 1999).

Some rural communities experience an "in-migration" of population, often made up of midcareer baby boomers seeking a more peaceful way of life. Ironically, the resulting increase in property values forces long-term rural residents out because they cannot afford the higher property taxes, nor can they afford to turn down the money offered for their land. Rural newcomers press and vote for citylike services—such as libraries, recreation centers, and road maintenance—that again raise taxes. Because they commute to urban jobs or keep only weekend homes in rural settings, they do not tend to make major purchases locally, participate in local events, become invested in the rural culture, or have true concern for the success or failure of neighbors. The new job opportunities they create tend to be low-wage service jobs. Rural service sector wage earners drive long distances to work because increased property values and taxes make it impossible to live where they work (Dilger et al., 2001).

### *Rural Communities*

Rural communities often retain traditional structures and faith-based service delivery systems that can be assets as well as challenges. They provide self-monitoring and vigilance, making rural communities safer than urban areas, and have a strong informal helping system. However, the same structures may be less hospitable to individuals perceived as outside the mainstream, such as people of color; women; or gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender populations.

The "strip and leave" practices of extractive industries and the crisis of urban and industrial waste have left rural areas with real potential ecological disasters and few resources to deal with them.

### *Service Delivery Systems*

Many rural areas are part of larger geographic service areas. Multicounty social and health services programs based in population centers





are designated to serve rural areas. Rural communities are generally offered fewer services than their numbers in the service area justify. Services may be offered primarily at a central location. All social workers should develop knowledge and skills for effective rural social work. Regional agencies must ensure that rural communities receive accessible and appropriate services and include rural residents in planning processes. Regional agencies should train staff to provide rural services in effective ways, such as assigning responsibility for particular rural sections and making efforts to build trust with residents of rural communities.

### ***ISSUE STATEMENT***

Social work practice in rural areas historically has sought to resolve issues of equity, service availability, and isolation that adversely affect rural populations and to support and advocate for vulnerable and at-risk people living in rural communities. Practitioners of rural social work are confronted with rural poverty that is more pervasive and hidden than urban poverty. Rural communities tend to be closed to outsiders. The dominant rural culture may harshly judge those who are perceived to be different. Rural communities are experiencing diminishing infrastructure systems and resources. Social workers in rural practice face professional and personal challenges that urban social workers may never face. The relative closeness of rural cultures, communities, and people greatly magnifies these concerns. Confidentiality can be an especially difficult practice issue in rural areas, where professional distance is difficult to maintain.

Effective rural social work practice demands that the social worker have command of impressive levels of expertise, subtlety, and sophistication and practice skill sets to match. The lack of professional preparation for rural social work practice is a concern that must be addressed. The recruitment and retention of social workers for rural practice is a major problem for the profession, leading to declassification, resistance to legal regulation, and the siphoning of social work jobs to those with little professional training.

Throughout history rural people have

migrated to urban centers seeking economic security in the face of joblessness, disaster, conflict, or war, sometimes creating rural ghettos in the city. Urban social workers should develop and maintain a proficiency in practice skills effective with rural individuals, families, and communities.

Rural areas are challenged by a lack of economic opportunities, resources, and influence of the popular culture. Worldwide, young rural residents turn away from their cultures, families, and traditions after exposure to television images and media presentations of "the good life."

Rural social workers deal with challenging issues of poverty, at-risk populations, and service delivery at the community, family, and individual intervention levels that are unique and different from urban practice. These and other factors raise crucial issues for social work practice and educational preparation for social work practice in rural areas.

### ***POLICY STATEMENT***

The understanding of rural people and cultures is a pressing issue of cultural competence in professional social work. Rural people, with their diverse cultural backgrounds, occupy and influence the majority of the earth's landmass. Unfortunately, the strengths of this influence are being rapidly lost in the cultural mainstream. The following information describes the factors necessary to an understanding of rural social work:

- Twenty-five percent of the population resides in rural areas that comprise 83 percent of the landmass of the United States (Davenport & Davenport, 1995).
- Rural areas are characterized by a sense of community, individual character, an awareness of place, and a sense of family and tradition.
- When rural people relocate, by necessity or choice, to take advantage of urban and suburban economic opportunity, their unique cultural values, norms, and conventions go with them. Special skills are needed to work effectively with displaced rural people.



- Social work practice in rural communities challenges the social worker to embrace and effectively use an impressive range of professional intervention and community skills. NASW encourages practice expertise at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

NASW should:

- recognize the existence of rural populations and encourage research and education to practice in a culturally competent manner
- support the application of professional ethical constructs to analyze relationship issues and otherwise behave in the best interest of clients. NASW must support research efforts that address crucial areas of social work practice such as the dilemmas of dual relationships, confidentiality, recruitment and retention of indigenous practitioners, and the presence of persistent poverty.

Rural areas suffer disproportionately when urban-based policies are forced on them. Corporate mergers, centralization, managed care, globalization, and similar cost-saving strategies solely based on urban models are disadvantageous to rural areas, where distance and time are barriers to efficiency of and access to social services, health care delivery, and health maintenance.

It is known that many rural people experience economic poverty but not well understood that they experience persistent poverty. Such lack of infrastructure, development, housing, education, and adequate health care is usually associated with blighted urban areas. The factors that foster despair, hopelessness, substance abuse, and domestic violence in the inner cities exist among rural poor populations.

Ethical practice in rural areas requires special attention to dual relationship issues. Few other settings expose social workers more to the risk of violating the *NASW Code of Ethics'* admonition that social workers are to "take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries" (NASW, 1999, section 1.06[c]). Social workers practicing in rural areas must have advanced understanding of ethical responsibilities, not only because dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, but also because the setting may require that dual or

multiple relationships be used and managed as an appropriate method of social work practice. Public and social policy must take into account the unique nature of rural areas and residents. NASW should lead efforts of social workers in forming equitable policies so that urban and rural populations and jurisdictions are not pitted against each other over issues of livelihood, lifestyle, economy, or ecology.

- NASW must continue to support the development of social work practice in rural areas by maintaining a presence that creates networking of current social workers and role modeling for future social workers who live in and need encouragement to remain in rural communities. Isolation and geographic distance are persistent challenges to rural social work practice that NASW must help to overcome.
- Through continuing education opportunities and support of distance education, NASW supports the need for social workers to provide a broad range of services, including clinical and health practice, community organization, administration and management, public welfare, and community-based services.
- NASW must work to develop social work that addresses the needs of clients across all age groups, particularly elderly people, who are the largest-growing group in rural communities.
- NASW must assist educational programs in teaching cultural competency in social work, to expand and include the understanding of rural cultures, diversity issues, and people in a contextual practice skills framework. Specialized coursework and advanced practice concentrations could be offered to prepare and encourage bachelor's as well as master's-level social work practice in rural areas.
- The eclectic skills of professional social workers are uniquely suited to helping rural people organize their lives; maintain families, communities, and organizations; and capitalize on their strengths to overcome adversity, identify and develop resources, and change their lives for the better.





- NASW must promote advocacy, legislation, and policy development that improve rural infrastructure, economic development, and availability and access to needed health care, reliable transportation, service delivery, public services, and education.

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