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NASW-NYS Interview with Celisia Street and Ray Cardona

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In March of 2013, SJS wrote a piece on the topic of social workers dissatisfaction with NASW. In an effort to hear the NASW's perspective, I contacted the NASW-NYS Chapter and requested an interview. I chose NASW-NY, as SJS is based in Long Island New York. I conducted a phone interview with Executive Director, Ray Cardona, LCSW and Communications & Professional Development Associate, Celisia Street, LMSW which proved informative and will hopefully ease the minds of New York Social Workers.

I learned that NASW-NYS is engaging in many levels of legislative advocacy to extend and expand the state's Social Work Loan Forgiveness Program, push for full implementation of the social work licensure law in exempt state agencies, required continuing education (which was passed and signed into law this year) and an array of legislative advocacy efforts to expand the settings in which social workers may practice.

Celisia noted that they do hear criticisms about the association on issues that the chapter is actually spending a great deal of time lobbying on. She went on to say that, "Once we educate social workers about the advocacy we are doing on their behalf, they are often pleasantly surprised. Obviously we need to do a better job at keeping members of the profession informed on all of the work we are doing on their behalf."

In addition, Ray highlighted the fact that they sponsor a wide variety of professional development programs such as their Veterans Mental Health Training Initiative which has, over the course of its three years of operation, trained nearly 1,800 mental health providers. Ray further noted that as a member driven organization, there are a number of ways for social workers to get involved with their profession association which include volunteering to be on committees, sharing their thoughts/concerns with staff and leadership, suggesting priorities, and having active leadership roles within the chapter.

During the course of the interview, Celisia made a comment that resonated with me, "Our effectiveness is as powerful as our membership is strong." She elaborated that an active and engaged membership is a critical component to positioning the chapter to make greater strides in bringing about changes that will strengthen and support members of the profession. Ray added, "Our work is supported by membership dues and membership

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participation. Given the current economy, everyone including NASW is doing more with less and we are acutely aware of the financial and time constraints of members of our profession, but the work of securing the future of our profession is of vital importance and being a united workforce has never been more critical.”

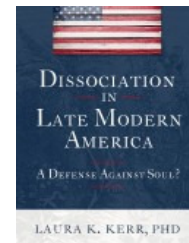
During the interview, I highlighted the issues (listed below) that our March article indicated were areas social workers wanted assistance with from NASW, and asked for comment. The article stressed that social workers want:

1. NASW to assist with compensation (salaries)
2. NASW to assist with study groups for licensure exams
3. NASW to assist with licensure supervision
4. NASW to address ‘student loan forgiveness’
5. NASW to focus on continued promotion of the social work profession
6. NASW to provide assistance with Continued Education units, advertising, promoting and advocating for affordable courses.
7. A yearly vote by members for what NASW will focus on each year
8. A new association, organization or union to be created for social workers if NASW or other social work organizations/associations continue on their current path.

In response, they provided the following details on the recent and ongoing accomplishments by the Chapter, which address several of the areas noted in the spring article.

NASW New York State has:

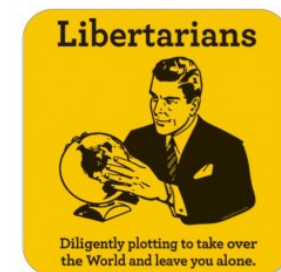
1. Blocked implementation of a PERMANENT exemption from social work licensure law for state agencies. If implemented, the exemption would forever allow untrained, uneducated individuals to be authorized to provide social work services, including diagnosis and treatment of serious mental and emotional disorders and essentially render the need for licensed social workers in settings across the state so insignificant that the profession could face extinction.
2. Prevented YET ANOTHER attempt to repeal the corporate practice waiver that enables more than 1,400 non-profits to employ licensed social workers.
3. Secured passage of continuing education requirements for social workers (effective January 1, 2015). To support their members in completing their required hours, NASW is offering a minimum of 12 CE credits annually for FREE as a benefit of membership, in addition to their robust array of educational opportunities offered at discounted member rates. The Chapter will continue to provide members with FREE participation in its C.E.R.P. program which tracks members CE activities for them.
4. Advocating for the passage of legislation adding LCSWs as qualified mental health providers under NYS workers compensation law (AB5299 / SB2360).
5. Annually sponsored several regional 2-day licensure exam preparation courses with an instructor who is one the most highly regarded exam preparation trainer in the U.S.
6. In 2005, the NASW-NYS and NYC chapters secured annual funding of \$1 million (for five years) for a social work loan forgiveness that was designed to increase the number of qualified and professionally trained social workers employed in critical human service areas such as health, mental illness, substance abuse, aging, HIV/AIDS, child welfare or communities with multilingual needs. The program has been administered by the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) since its inception and as such, has awarded individual grants as high as \$26,000.00 in total to NYS licensed social workers who meet the residency and citizenship requirements; have an outstanding balance on an eligible student loan; and have at least one year of qualified service in a critical human service



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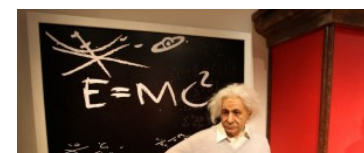
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area for at least 35 hours per week during the calendar year prior to their application. Typically, 144-146 individuals benefit from this program a year and it is the most utilized loan forgiveness program administered by HESC. The New York Chapters of NASW successfully secured an additional 5 years of nearly \$1 million dollars annually for the [NYS Social Work Loan Forgiveness Program](#) (through 2016). A priority for the NYS Chapter in the 2014 legislative session is to secure additional funding and expand the program's eligibility criteria so that more social workers can benefit from the program.

When asked about decision making within the organization, Celisia (who is the staff liaison to the Chapter's Committee on Nominations and Leadership Identification) emphasized the fact that NASW is a membership led organization. "Our Board of Directors and committees are entirely comprised of members from various regions of the state and diverse backgrounds." Members are eligible to run for elected leadership roles within the association or volunteer for appointment to a committee of interest or importance to them. Ray added that, "The chapter periodically conducts surveys to collect information on what the current priority issues are for their members. This information is then provided to our Advocacy & Government Relations Committee for their review and consideration. Staff provides additional information and resources and the committee makes recommendations for legislative priority areas to the Board of Directors who then makes final decisions about the direction of chapter advocacy efforts." There are a variety of ways for members to be involved and have their voices heard, by communicating directly to the chapter or national office, to their local division director, at local steering committee meetings or to a member of a chapter committee. Greater participation by members is strongly encouraged.

As I thought about the cost of being a licensed social worker who is a member of their professional association, I decided to gather information to offer a comparison between the professional expenses for social workers in NYS and those incurred by professionals in my home of Canada. A membership to NASW will cost a social worker \$190.00 a year, but it includes membership to the local NASW (NASW-NYS has 10 regional divisions), State NASW and National NASW, when many other professional organizations charge separate fees for membership at each of these levels. Licensing in the state of New York will cost a social worker for [the initial application/fees- \\$294.00](#). Triennial renewal fees are currently \$179.00.

As a BSW or MSW degree holder who lives in Canada, the initial registration and application fees associated with becoming a registered social worker in the province of Quebec (here it is about title protection and the ability to speak and work in French due to Quebec language laws) are almost \$900.00 with taxes! Yearly renewal is currently over \$400+taxes a year. One joins [CASW](#) separately only for provinces which are not partner organizations with CASW; the provinces of Alberta (due to education requirements) Ontario (the province has two levels of workers covered under the college- social workers and social service workers) and Quebec (due to language requirements). [Each province/territory has it's own social work provincial college/association](#), which one must join to become a registered social worker.

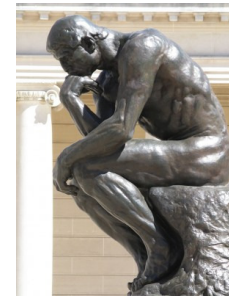
New Yorkers, you are getting a better bargain! Not to mention the fact that we all worked hard to obtain our degrees and in doing so shelled out a lot of money, so the fact that NYS has a Social Work Loan Forgiveness program that the Chapter is trying to expand is good. I'm sorry it was not around when I graduated with my MSW 16 years ago, since I am still paying down my loans!

Although this is an in depth look at the NYS Chapter, for our SJS readers who may live in another state, I urge social workers to approach [your state NASW Chapter](#) and share your concerns, suggest areas for improvement, and most importantly volunteer in order to make

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change happen. NASW will not know what is going on in your mind if you do not voice your concerns/suggestions.

I have seen quite a few petitions on social media re: social work complaints and suggestions for change and this is certainly a good beginning, but more is needed. There are still grumblings on social media from many social workers and I think it is time for social workers to act....become part of the solution.

Social media is a wonderful way to share information, connect with other professionals and 'toot our horns' regarding the good that we do. Social Work gets a 'bad rap' from society and other professions and really shouldn't. Often, social work is seen and described as the 'lesser' profession. NASW (National) launched the [Social Workers Speak](#) website to address this important issue of the portrayal of social work in the media. The platform enables social workers to discuss the topic and even give cheers for positive media coverage and jeers for inaccurate portrayals of the profession. The National website: www.socialworkers.org has a lot of resources for social workers in diverse areas of practice, webinar trainings that are free for members, and even a landing page for the general public to learn more about our profession and find a social worker in their area.

While NASW-NYS is making some strides in advancing the profession in their state, it is up to all of us as members of the profession to do our part and participate in bringing greater visibility, respect, and value to our chosen profession. Share the positives, advertise your work (as a social worker!), share the research you are doing, your articles/blogs, any books written for the profession or the public at large and spotlight your creativity! If we, as social workers do not do this, we cannot expect others to do this for us.

Be powerful. Be strong.

Written by Victoria Brewster, MSW
SJS Staff Writer

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