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NORTH DAKOTA SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE REPORT

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NORTH DAKOTA SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE REPORT

Executive Summary

In 2006, the National Association of Social Workers' Center for Workforce Studies published the results of a study which indicated that "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" (NASW, 2006, p. 2). Since North Dakota is a predominantly rural state (68% of North Dakota counties are classified as "frontier"), the authors of this North Dakota Social Work Workforce Report wanted to determine if similar issues were present in the North Dakota social work workforce. The authors interviewed social work students about their interest in rural social work employment, surveyed North Dakota licensed social workers regarding job satisfaction, and surveyed North Dakota social service agency representatives about recruitment and retention practices and their perspectives on other workforce issues.

The study's participants provided a mostly positive picture of the social work field but also offered clear admonitions and recommendations for preserving the health of the North Dakota social work workforce. Findings from the study indicated that:

- Many social work students come from rural roots and appreciate various aspects of rural life, but over 70% of those interviewed (both BSW and MSW) prefer to work in or near an urban area
- 69% of licensed social workers felt their case load size was "just right"
- 13% of social workers supervise "social work designees"
- 47.23% of social workers indicated that "burnout/stress" was the least enjoyable aspect of their job; 40.6% indicated that "not enough services for clients" was also a least enjoyable aspect of their job
- 46.7% of social workers who identified their practice as "rural" and 49% of those who identified their practice as "non-rural" expressed satisfaction with their current salaries
- 58.3% of social workers felt that their social work education did a good job of preparing them for a social work career
- 34% of social service agencies reported employing "social work designees"
- 39% of agencies indicated needing additional full-time BSW positions, and 23% of agencies responded that they needed additional full-time MSW positions
- "Not being able to pay a competitive salary" was seen as the most serious problem related to recruitment and retention of social work staff
- 42% of agency respondents felt there was a shortage of social workers (BSW or MSW) in "rural areas" of North Dakota, particularly in western and northwestern North Dakota.

In addition to detailing these and other findings, the Report offers a set of recommendations for three groups:

- 1) **Policy Makers** -- Competitive salaries and benefits are primary and necessary incentives for recruiting service providers to rural areas. Educational stipends and loan forgiveness are also useful in recruiting graduates to rural communities. Policy makers could also

support the development of additional technological tools that allow more services to be delivered at a distance and that ensure rural workers quick and routine access to consultants, colleagues, and professional networks. Continued collaboration with rural communities related to economic development initiatives will encourage the growth of client services and of various dimensions of community life that attract and retain workers at various stages of their careers.

- 2) **Agency Administrators** - Wages and benefits must provide an incentive to live in rural areas, particularly more remote areas. In addition, it must be recognized that the current practice of declassifying social work positions in certain service arenas in order to hire para-professionals, such as “social work designees,” will not assure the same level of quality in service. This approach must be adamantly challenged by agency directors, supervisors, and the social work field in general. Employers must also ensure that quality social work supervision is available to guarantee professional services, and development activities must be provided that advance professional credentials and attract potential employees.
- 3) **Social Work Educators** - Social work faculty need to ensure that, in addition to delineating the struggles of rural practice, they also highlight the changing complexities, strengths, and the potential futures of rural communities. Competence in rural social work practice can be supported by further development of curricula related to rural social work, diverse communities, entitlements, and clinical practice skills. Programs could also offer increased hands-on experience in rural service provision, and routine outreach by rural agencies to social work students.

The study discussed in this Report provides an overview of the North Dakota social work workforce for a particular point in time. Future studies will be needed to examine changes in the workforce and how future workforces compare to its current configuration and conditions. The authors hope, however, that this Report may provide a baseline for comparison with future data and that it will encourage a better understanding of and ongoing support for individual social workers, their host agencies, and the North Dakota citizens they serve.

NORTH DAKOTA SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE REPORT

Context of Study

United States Census data for 2010 reports the current population of North Dakota at 672,591, the second highest in the state's history (North Dakota State Data Center, 2011). This represents a 4.7% increase from the state's 2000 census. This population increase has been particularly notable since 2007 due to both natural increases and net in-migration (North Dakota State Data Center, 2009). Low unemployment rates and the oil and gas boom in the western part of the state have fueled the in-migration by creating thousands of jobs and attracting workers from other states.

Despite North Dakota's population increase and low unemployment rate of 3.6% (United States Department of Labor, 2011), the in-state rural-to-urban migration has resulted in most North Dakota counties experiencing a decrease in population over the last decade (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). This is especially significant given the fact that 69% of North Dakota counties are already designated as "frontier," meaning they contain fewer than seven people per square mile (ND State Data Center, n.d.a.).

Rural depopulation has been a trend in the state for several decades, as has the aging of the population [by 2015, 20% of the state's population will be 65 or older (AARP, 2008)]. At the time that the study discussed in this Report was conducted, the North Dakota State Data Center was reporting that these two trends, along with out-migration of young adults and young families, were resulting in serious consequences for North Dakota communities. These consequences include school consolidations, clinic closings, increased costs of goods and services, and increased need for housing and services for the elderly (North Dakota State Data Center, n.d.b.). In addition, with oil and gas development in western North Dakota, the *increased* concentration of population in certain areas has resulted in further negative consequences for those areas, such as housing shortages, damaged roads, strains on sewer systems, concerns about water use, and other environmental and social issues (Davey, 2010; North Dakota Farmer's Union, n.d.; Dyke, et al., 2010).

In the context of these demographic trends and social concerns, the authors of this report undertook a study to determine the status of the North Dakota social work workforce, particularly as it pertained to rural areas. The authors were concerned about a potential shortage of rural social workers, were curious about the career intentions of social work students, and wanted information on the job satisfaction of practicing North Dakota social workers. The researchers also wanted to determine if North Dakota was reflective of national trends which indicated that "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" (National Association of Social Workers, 2006, p. 2). Related to the last problem just mentioned, the authors were interested in the extent to which "social work designees" were used in North Dakota human service agencies. "Social work designees" are those non-social work staff allowed by the North Dakota Century Code to carry out social work tasks in hospitals, basic care facilities, or skilled nursing facilities provided they "work under the direction of a social worker" or a licensed social work consultant

(ND Century Code Chapter 43-41-02, n.d.). A 2007 report by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Mental Health Program suggested that North Dakota was having problems with the supply of behavioral health workers generally, indicating that “the entire state (46 of 53 counties, 23 geographic areas and 16 facilities) is designated as a federal Mental Health Professional Shortage Area” (WICHE, 2007). The report also noted that North Dakota is 43rd among states in social workers per capita, that North Dakota ranked toward the bottom (seventh among 12 regional states) in employment of child, family, and school social workers, and was fourth among 12 regional states in employment of mental health and substance abuse social workers (WICHE, 2007).

In order to determine the status of the social work workforce in North Dakota, particularly in more rural areas, the researchers conducted a three-phase study which sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are social work student perceptions of rural social work practice?
2. How satisfied are current social work practitioners with their jobs?
3. What are the barriers and incentives to rural social work practice as identified by rural social work practitioners?
4. Is there a shortage of social workers in North Dakota, particularly in rural areas?
5. What are social work recruitment and retention issues as viewed by agency administrators?

Study Methods

The study took place between summer 2008 and summer 2010 and involved the following phases and methods:

Phase 1*: *Social Work Students*. Researchers met during class times with Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students from four social work programs in North Dakota and Minnesota. Students were asked to individually complete a brief survey, and then a focus group interview was conducted based on the survey questions. Questions were particularly focused on student interest in practicing social work in rural areas. Interview data were analyzed for categories and themes.

Phase 2: *North Dakota Licensed Social Workers*. A hard-copy survey was sent to 1,600 licensed social workers. Quantitative results from surveys were used to develop descriptive data charts and tables. Narrative responses to open-ended survey questions were analyzed for categories and themes.

Phase 3: *North Dakota Social Service Agency Directors or Their Representatives*. An online survey link was emailed to 310 agency administrators or their representatives. Quantitative results from surveys were used to develop descriptive data charts and tables. Narrative responses to open-ended survey questions were analyzed for categories and themes.

*Phase 1 findings were published in the journal *Contemporary Rural Social Work* (Volume 2, 2010). The authors of this report thank the journal for its permission to reproduce the following Phase 1 material.

PHASE 1: Survey of, and Focus Group Interviews with, BSW and MSW Students

1.1 Participants

Ninety-seven (97) BSW students from four BSW programs participated in the study. The mean age of these students was 27.12. Eighteen (18) MSW students from one graduate program participated in the study. The mean age of these participants was 30.39.

1.2 Findings

On the survey, students indicated the size of their home community and the size of the community in which they planned to practice social work. Response categories were based on Rural Urban Continuum Codes used by the United States Department of Agriculture and the frontier designation used by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. The responses to these questions, found in Table 1, provide an interesting juxtaposition between students' communities of origin and their preferred practice location. Fifty-four (54) percent (n=52) of BSWs and 47% (n=8) of MSWs indicated that they had lived in rural areas at the time of their high school graduation (percent totals from last three rows of first and third columns). When making selections about their preferred practice location, participants could choose more than one response. Overwhelmingly, (73% BSW, 72% MSW), student responses indicated that, despite their rural roots, their preference was to work in or near metropolitan or urban areas (percent totals from top four rows of second and fourth columns from Table 1).

Table 1. Place of Residence at High School Graduation Compared to Choice of Practice Location

Community Size	Place of Residence at time of High School Graduation	Choice of Practice Location	Place of Residence at time of High School Graduation	Choice of Practice Location
	<u>BSW^a</u> n (%)	<u>BSW^c</u> n (%)	<u>MSW^b</u> n (%)	<u>MSW^d</u> n (%)
Metro area of 250,000+	5 (5)	24 (10)	0 (0)	1 (3)
Metro area of fewer than 250,000	13 (14)	55 (23)	4 (23)	6 (15)
Urban/suburban area of 20,000-49,999	13 (14)	50 (21)	2 (12)	13 (32)
Town or area of 2,500-19,999 adjacent to a metro area	12 (13)	46 (19)	3 (18)	9 (22)
Town or area of 2,500-19,999 not adjacent to metro area	23 (24)	31 (13)	4 (23)	7 (18)
Rural area of less than 2,500	26 (27)	21 (9)	3 (18)	3 (8)
Frontier area of less than 7 people per square mile	3 (3)	10 (4)	1 (6)	1 (2)

Notes. ^an=95 useable BSW surveys; ^bn=17 useable MSW surveys; ^cn= 237 BSW responses; ^dn= 40 MSW responses.

In the focus groups, students were asked a number of questions about what “rural” means to them, about the advantages and disadvantages of working in rural areas, what incentives would

attract them to rural areas, and what is needed to best prepare them for social work practice in rural areas. The following themes emerged from analysis of their responses.

- **Theme 1: Student definitions of “rural” reflect the images and features of rural areas and towns.** When asked what “rural” meant to them, students rarely mentioned the size of a community. Instead, they described many of the physical features associated with rural areas such as dirt roads, absence of stoplights, agricultural and ranching activity, and consolidated schools, laughing when these consolidations were referred to as “schools with five letters in the name” (referring to the first letter of the names of small communities that merged into one school district). But participants also identified rural as associated with the unique human features of rural communities, noting that “everyone is related,” “you have a street named after your family,” the “sense of community,” “families bring their kids to eat in bars—and it’s OK,” and that people in rural areas “hold grudges.”
- **Theme 2: Student perceptions of “rural” contain contradictions.** Participants discussed various features of rural life, which reflected inherent contradictions. Rural schools were viewed as being either better or worse than urban schools. Participants reported feeling either safer or less safe in rural areas. Rural communities were described as providing a wonderful sense of community, but residents were also seen as “gossipy” and “nosy.” Living in a rural area generally meant having the good fortune to know everyone, but also meant lacking a sense of privacy. Being a rural social worker meant being able to use generalist practice skills, but a social worker was also seen as “having to do everything.”
- **Theme 3: Rural social work workforce shortages reflect interplay between rural dynamics and struggles related to rural social work practice.** When asked their opinions about why there may be a shortage of rural social workers, participant responses suggested that the answer lay in an interesting synergy between the dynamics of contemporary rural life in the upper Midwest/Great Plains and the demands of rural social work practice. Participants discussed “rural flight” and changing family values, which meant that young people were feeling less pressure to stay in or return to their rural home communities. They talked about low salaries, the lack of opportunities, too much travel, and few or no jobs for spouses or significant others. These factors were paired with their perceptions that being a rural social worker meant being an “outsider,” struggling with dual relationships, having little privacy, and being “seen as a social worker and not a social person.” Being a visible professional in a community also raised fears about making mistakes and being stigmatized because of the “regulatory role” that social workers play. There was also significant concern about a conflict in values. One participant asserted that small towns and rural communities tended to be conservative, while social workers tended to be liberal. This conflict was highlighted by the comment that in rural communities, “you can’t put up your gay pride flag.”
- **Theme 4: Many of the components of rural communities that would attract students to rural practice are the very things that are disappearing from rural communities.** When asked what would attract them to rural social work, many students who were from rural areas mentioned the characteristics that make them feel connected to their homes: the close-knit sense of community, knowing everyone, “cheaper cost of living,” and enjoying activities such as fishing and hunting. But they also acknowledged that attractive components would

include good schools, activities for their children, local health care facilities, good jobs for self and one's significant other, a continuum of services for their clients, and a viable pool of people to date or with whom to socialize. Unfortunately, many of these components are rapidly disappearing from rural areas.

- **Theme 5: Incentives for rural social work practice fall into three categories: “what I need;” “what my family needs;” and “what the community needs to have in it.”** Although realistic about what rural areas offered both personally and professionally, students also discussed the components of rural communities that would ideally attract them to rural practice. For themselves, participants listed both personal and professional needs, such as potential relationships, social networks, a quality and flexible work environment, and good salary and benefits. For their families, they wanted good schools, activities for their children, and jobs for their significant others. They also noted that they would be attracted to communities which offered good schools, low crime, access to shopping (Target stores were frequently mentioned), diverse people, and child care.
- **Theme 6: Incentives are concrete, extensive, and reflect an understanding of how systems (policy-making, social service agency, community) could meet the needs of rural social workers.** In addition to speaking generally about incentive categories (Theme 5), participants were also concrete about the specific incentives that various systems could offer to attract them to rural practice. “Good salary” (\$40,000+) and good benefits, as well as loan forgiveness, were the number one incentives, followed by quality supervision, access to mentors, ability to relocate to a city after five years of rural service, and use of a company car. Other incentives included subsidized continuing education opportunities, subsidized licensure renewal, flexible work schedules with some ability to work from home, relocation benefits, jobs for significant others, and housing options. One respondent's comments were indicative of a general consensus: “I would want a competitive wage and benefits, also opportunities to further my education and allowing access to CEU [continuing education unit] hours. Another important factor for me is good supervision and co-workers due to the support and teamwork that is needed to develop a good functioning agency.”

Students also understood the relationship between these incentives and the larger issue of rural community development. They talked about the importance of economic development initiatives and the need to attract diverse people to rural communities. They were clear that community development would be connected to their own personal and professional success.

- **Theme 7: The success of rural social work practice depends on an accessible continuum of services for client systems.** In tandem with community development, and to their credit as developing social workers, students noted the need for a rural continuum of social services in order to feel attracted to rural social work practice. Without services to support clients, participants recognized that their jobs would be considerably more difficult, and the possibility of professional frustration and burnout would be much higher.
- **Theme 8: The attraction of rural social work comes from an appreciation for the positives of rural life and from an understanding of hallmarks of effective social work practice.** When asked about the benefits of practicing social work in rural areas, responses were reflective of participants' positive experiences with rural life. They noted the quiet and

peaceful aspects of rural area, “knowing everyone,” and being able to make a difference because of the smaller, more manageable size of rural communities. Students from rural areas commented on their “passion for rural folk” and that rural life is “what I know.”

Benefits to rural social work practice also reflected the perception that effective social work practices could be more easily implemented in rural areas. Such practices included in-depth knowledge of one’s clients including their informal networks, building positive professional networks to draw on, being grounded in generalist practice, having knowledge of all resources available to clients, being able to get help fast, having the flexibility to be creative, and having smaller case loads. As one participant noted, “I think that it would be easy to master the social service delivery system in your area and also you would be able to build solid relationships with community members and clients.”

Theme 9: Social work education programs play an important role in encouraging and preparing students for rural practice. Researchers asked participants how social work education could be enhanced in order to encourage or better prepare students for rural practice. Although students acknowledged receiving rural content in their education, they had concrete and extensive recommendations for how education programs could be improved in order to dispel stereotypes and excite interest in rural practice. They suggested that rural social workers speak in classes on a regular basis so students can better understand what their daily routine looks like. A required or elective course on rural social work was a frequent response, as was infusing more rural content across the curriculum. Several respondents underscored the importance of a course on working with American Indian communities and the need for course content related to working with groups such as refugees or other “New Americans.” A course in eligibility programs was also suggested as was more training in leadership and supervision since “you have to become part of the community if you’re in a rural community and...being a good social worker doesn’t necessarily equate to being a good supervisor.”

In addition to course recommendations, getting more exposure to and experience in rural areas and rural social work was a frequent response theme. Going out to rural areas was seen as necessary to “help break down the fear of working in rural areas.” One student noted that it would be helpful if students could “go on a field trip to see that the office isn’t a trailer.” Students also recommended mini rural field experiences, rural volunteer or service-learning activities, and more rural internships. They also suggested that if rural agencies had a stronger outreach presence in social work training programs, more students might be recruited to rural internships or employment.

Summary of Phase 1 Findings

Participant comments reveal that it may be a challenge to attract many of these students to rural areas and rural social work practice. The aspects of rural communities that seemed to be most attractive to students such as good schools, activities for kids, good jobs, social networks, and services for clients, are the very things that are disappearing from rural communities. Students were clear, however, that incentives could be provided that would attract them to rural practice. For themselves, students voiced the need for a flexible work environment, good salary and benefits, high-quality supervision, access to personal and professional networks, and a

continuum of services for clients. For their families, they wanted good schools, jobs for significant others, and activities for their kids. In addition, the communities in which they lived would need to have good child care, diverse people, a variety of amenities, and low crime rates. These expectations stand in contrast to the nature of life in many rural areas and they underscore the challenges to workforce recruitment. Nevertheless, student participants recognized that incentives were possible via actions on the part of policy makers, agencies, and communities. Such actions could take the form of attractive salaries and benefits, loan forgiveness, paid relocation expenses, financial support for licensure and continuing education, job security, agency cars, guaranteed health insurance, opportunities for job mobility and rotation, and development of services for clients.

PHASE 2: Survey of North Dakota Licensed Social Workers

Phase 2 involved a survey of North Dakota licensed social workers to determine demographics, levels of education, employment characteristics, and job satisfaction. A section of the survey also asked participants whether they considered their practice rural, and if so, what they most and least enjoyed about rural practice and what incentives would continue to encourage their commitment to rural practice. Participants were also asked to reflect on their social work education.

Percentages provided are reflective of total responses for any given question, not for the complete data set. Although there was an overall total of 686 respondents, not all respondents answered each question; therefore, percentages reported are relative to the number of respondents that actually answered the question.

2.1 Participants

In the fall of 2009, hard copy surveys were mailed to 1,600 licensed North Dakota social workers. Survey recipients were asked to complete and return the survey if they were currently employed as a social worker in North Dakota. Six hundred eighty-six (43%) were returned. As can be seen in Figure 1, for the 653 respondents who reported their ethnicity, the vast majority of respondents (95 %) were “White, not of Hispanic origin.” Of the 686 respondents, 582 females

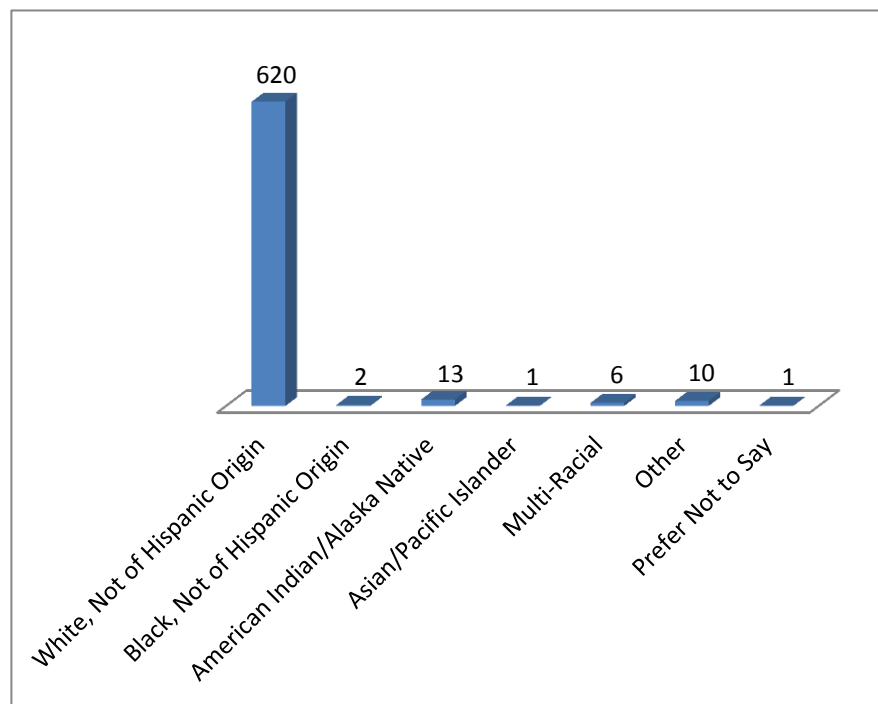


Figure 1. Racial/Ethnic Categories Selected by Participants

and 76 males responded to the survey. The average respondent age was 43.69 (SD=11.3). Three hundred sixty one (361) individuals, or 53%, indicated that they considered all or part of their practice to be rural.

2.2 Findings

The following charts and tables provide a summary of the data related to participant educational and employment characteristics, job satisfaction, and experiences with rural social work practice.

Education, Licensure, and Employment

Five hundred and seventy three (573) respondents (83.5%) reported holding a BSW. One hundred eighty-four (184) respondents (26.8%) held an MSW. Seventy-five (75) percent (n=515) of respondents were licensed at the Licensed Social Worker (LSW) level, meaning that they held a BSW and worked for an agency. Thirteen (13) percent (n=86) were licensed at the LCSW (Licensed Certified Social Worker) level, meaning they held a master’s or doctorate in social work and worked for an agency. Twelve (12) percent (n=81) were licensed as Licensed Independent Clinical Social Workers (LICSW), meaning that they held a master’s or doctorate in social work, could engage in independent practice, and were eligible for reimbursement by third party insurance payers (see Figure 2). Out of the 677 participants who responded 89% (n=600) reported full-time employment (see Figure 3) and the average social worker planned to work at least 18 more years before retirement.

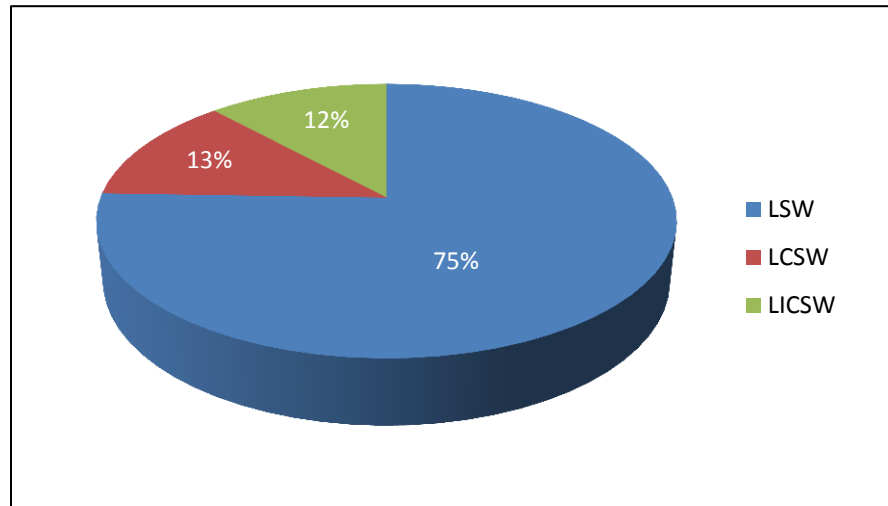


Figure 2. Licensure Level of Participants

Twelve (12) percent (n=81) were licensed as Licensed Independent Clinical Social Workers (LICSW), meaning that they held a master’s or doctorate in social work, could engage in independent practice, and were eligible for reimbursement by third party insurance payers (see Figure 2). Out of the 677 participants who responded 89% (n=600) reported full-time employment (see Figure 3) and the average social worker planned to work at least 18 more years before retirement.

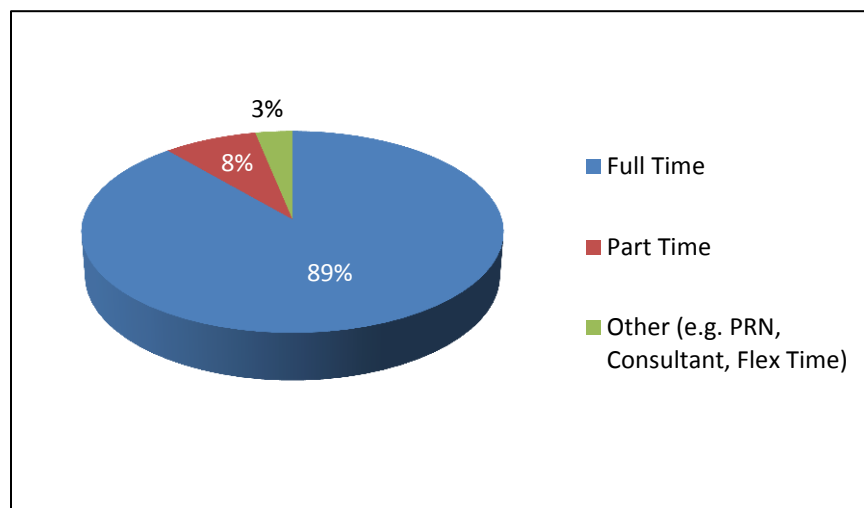


Figure 3. Employment Status of Participants

The typical social worker in North Dakota has been licensed for 14.7 years (SD=8.14) and plans on working an additional 18.45 years before retirement (SD=10.99). Full-time employees (n=600) averaged 42.3 hours a week (SD=4.88), while part-time social workers (n=55) averaged 23.66 hours a week (SD=7.73). Survey respondents were

asked about their employment setting and fields of practice. For both questions, they could select more than one setting and field of practice. County and regional agencies, medical settings, and mental health agencies employed the majority of social workers. See Tables 2 and 3 for more information. The percentages reported in Table 2 and 3 are reflective of the total number of participants (N=686).

Table 2. Employment Settings of Respondents

Employment Setting(s)	n (%)
County Social Service Center	139 (20.3%)
Hospital or Medical Clinic	99 (14.4%)
Regional Human Services Center	89 (12.9%)
Mental Health/Counseling Agency	82 (11.9%)
Youth Serving Agency	63 (9.1%)
Nursing Home or Elder Care Facility	56 (8.1%)
School	56 (8.1%)
Justice/Corrections Facility	24 (3.5%)
Community Center	2 (0.3%)

Table 3. Fields of Practice of Respondents

Fields of Practice	n (%)
Family and Children Services	315 (45.9%)
Mental Health	236 (34.4%)
Information and Retrieval	233 (34%)
Gerontological Services	130 (18.9%)
Developmental and Other Disabilities	119 (17.3%)
Administration	89 (12.9%)
Health and Rehabilitation	87 (12.6%)
Addictions	86 (12.5%)
Violence and Abuse Services	68 (9.9%)
Juvenile and/or Adult Corrections	59 (8.6%)
Community Development	36 (5.2%)
Income Maintenance	29 (4.2%)
Occupational Social Work	7 (1%)

Survey participants were asked about their caseload size and whether or not they felt their caseloads were too large, too small, or “just right.” As can be seen in Figure 4, out of the 529 responses received, 69% (n=363) of social workers felt their case load size was “just right.” The average caseload was 42 cases, with 15 cases being the most frequently reported caseload size.

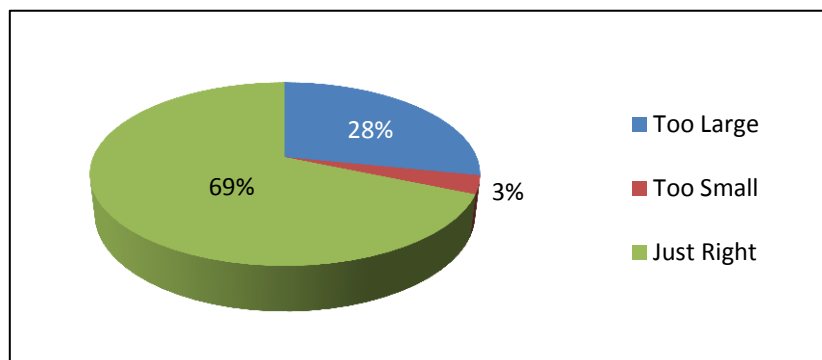


Figure 4. Participant Perception of Case Load Size

Supervision of Social Work Designees

The North Dakota Century Code, Chapter 43-41, provides an overview of social work position definitions and descriptions. It describes social work “designees” as those individuals employed by hospitals, basic care facilities, or skilled nursing facilities who do not hold social work degrees but who may provide social work services, “provided these individuals work under the direction of a social worker or consultant licensed under this chapter and that the board be notified of the name of the designee’s employer and the name of the licensee who is providing direction or consultation to the designees” (North Dakota Century Code, Chapter 43-41, n.d., p. 1). As can be seen in Figure 5, 13% (n=84) indicated that they supervise social work “designees,” with two being the average number of designees supervised.

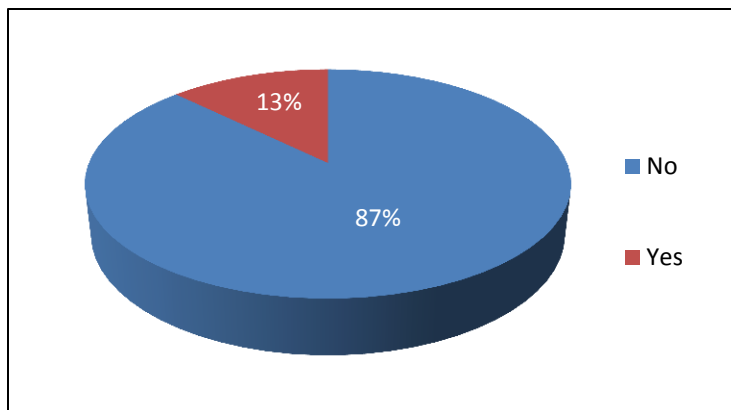


Figure 5. Percentage of Respondents Who Supervised Social Work Designees

The Experience of Social Work Practice in North Dakota

The survey provided two lists of social work practice characteristics, one list contained the most enjoyable aspects, and one contained the least enjoyable. Respondents were asked to check as many aspects on each list as they wanted. Tables 4 and 5 indicate the number of responses related to most enjoyable and least enjoyable aspects as selected by survey respondents. The percentages reported in Table 4 and 5 are reflective of the total number of participants (N=686).

Table 4. Aspects Participants Most Enjoy About Their Current Practice

Aspect	n (%)
The work is meaningful	564 (82.2%)
Good relationships with other professionals	528 (76.9%)
I'm very familiar with community and regional resources	439 (64%)
Good benefits	377 (54.9%)
I get to do a little (or a lot) of everything	375 (54.6%)
I can make change happen	372 (54.2%)
My professional networks	355 (51.7%)
I can be creative	336 (48.9%)
Close to family	273 (39.8%)
Good salary	250 (36.4%)
Use of informal networks for clients	229 (33.3%)
High quality services for clients	190 (27.7%)
I can get help fast for clients	161 (23.4%)
Able to work in the community where I grew up	153 (22.3 %)
Plenty of services for clients	104 (15.1%)
Small case load	87 (12.6%)
Everyone in the community knows me	75 (10.9%)
Low stress job	50 (7.3%)

Table 5. Aspects Participants Least Enjoy About Their Current Practice

Aspect	n (%)
Burnout/stress	324 (47.23%)
Not enough service for clients	279 (40.6%)
Low salary	251 (36.5%)
No opportunities for job mobility or job change	175 (25.5%)
Stigma attached to social work	139 (20.2%)
High case load	134 (19.5%)
I'm expected to do everything	114 (16.6%)
Managing dual relationships	95 (13.8%)
Poor quality services for clients	91 (13.2%)
No social life	53 (7.7%)
No privacy	42 (6.1%)
Living in a fishbowl	40 (5.8%)
My values differ from those around me	38 (5.5%)
Not many professional colleagues	37 (5.4%)
People moving away from the community	28 (4.1%)
Everyone in the community knows me	25 (3.6%)
There is no job for my significant other where I live or work	19 (2.7%)
I don't feel accepted in the community where I work	13 (1.8%)

General Comments about Practicing Social Work in North Dakota

Survey participants could also provide additional comments about their North Dakota practice experience by responding to the statement, *“Please provide any additional comments about your practice or about social work in North Dakota.”* One hundred seventy-five (175) responses were given. These responses were analyzed, resulting in the following themes:

1. Social workers generally enjoy their jobs, feel that North Dakota is a good place to work, and are proud to be members of the social work profession.
2. The social work profession in North Dakota struggles under the pressures of low wages, high stress, demanding work, and insufficient services for clients (particularly in extreme rural areas).
3. Social workers report that other professionals and the public undervalue social work and do not fully understand what social workers do.
4. Barriers to client-centered practice include federal and state requirements, lack of collegiality between systems, and lack of support and understanding from agency and social service system leadership.

Rural Social Work Practice

Survey participants were asked whether or not they considered their practice to be rural. Three hundred sixty-one (361) individuals responded “yes” to this question. A follow-up open-ended question was, *“Why do you consider your practice to be rural?”* One hundred and seven (107) individuals responded by identifying community size, the size of their service catchment area, travel distance, limited resources, the rural nature of the state and their communities, rural characteristics, and the “mind set” of rural people as reasons why they considered their practice to be rural.

From a set of five response options about their current attitudes about rural practice, 60% (n=216) indicated that they were “mostly satisfied with rural social work practice” (see Figure 6).

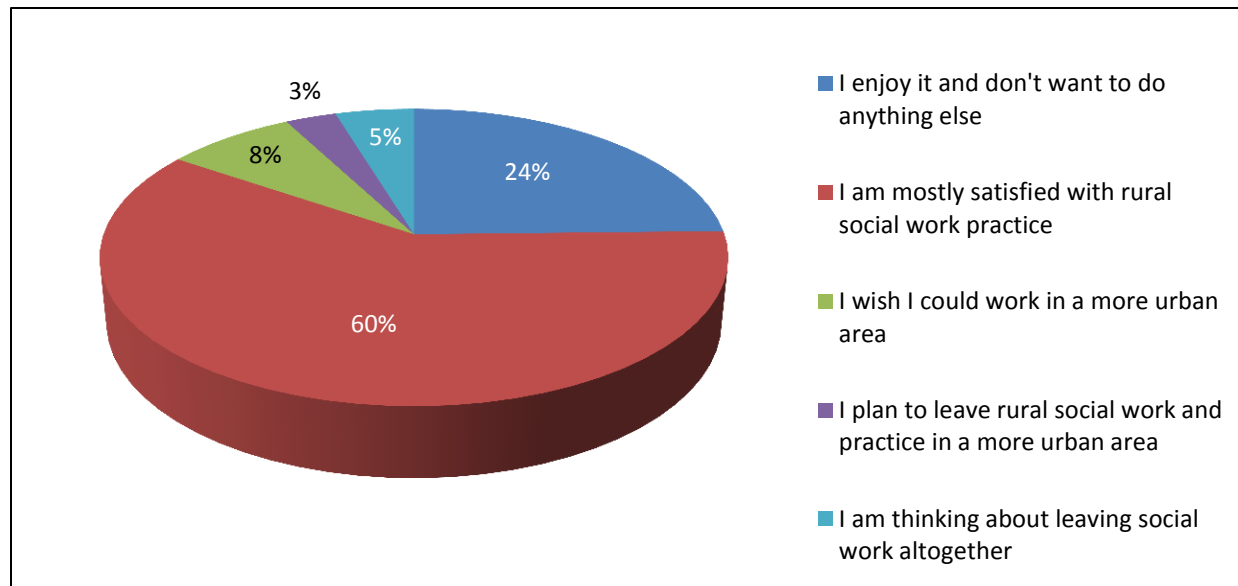


Figure 6. Current Attitudes about Rural Social Work Practice

Survey respondents who identified their practice as rural were asked to check off, from a list of 16 items, all items that would continue to make rural social work attractive to them. Table 6 shows the top ten responses. The percentages reported in Table 6 are relative to the 361 respondents who claimed their practice was rural

Table 6. Factors that Would Continue to Make Rural Social Work Attractive

Factors	n (%)
Higher salary	233 (64.5%)
Better/more benefits	132 (36.5%)
Upward mobility	101 (27.9%)
Better/more support for continuing education	89 (24.6%)
Increased mileage reimbursement	75 (20.7%)
More staff	72 (19.9%)
Having an agency car	68 (18.8%)
Better/more technology	68 (18.8%)
A lower caseload	63 (17.4%)
Opportunity to have more input into agency decision making	57 (15.7%)

Comparison of Rural and Non-Rural Job Satisfaction

All survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements related to their current jobs. Tables 7 and 8 compare the most frequently chosen responses between social workers who indicated that their practice was rural and those who did not indicate that their practice was rural. The percentages reported in Tables 7 and 8 are indicative of the total number of participants who responded to each question.

Table 7. Level of Agreement Regarding Aspects of Current Practice in a Rural Setting

Aspect of Current Practice	Level of Agreement (1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)					
	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
I have sufficient control over my work schedule.	9 (2.5%)	21 (5.9%)	58 (16.2%)	121 (33.8%)	148 (41.3%)	1 (0.3%)
My present salary is satisfactory.	28 (7.8%)	65 (18.2%)	98 (27.4%)	112 (31.3%)	55 (15.4%)	0 (0%)
I am satisfied with the types of activities I do on my job.	2 (0.6%)	9 (2.5%)	70 (19.6%)	182 (51.0%)	94 (26.3%)	0 (0%)
I think I could do a better job if I did not have so much to do all the time.	18 (5.0%)	48 (13.4%)	112 (31.4%)	97 (27.2%)	77 (21.6%)	5 (1.4%)
I wish I had more to do.	196 (54.9%)	86 (24.1%)	44 (12.3%)	17 (4.8%)	7 (2.0%)	7 (2.0%)
I have to travel too much for my job.	125 (35.5%)	82 (23.3%)	86 (24.4%)	39 (11.1%)	14 (4.0%)	6 (1.7%)
There is too much paperwork required of me.	19 (5.3%)	52 (14.6%)	103 (28.9%)	100 (28.0%)	83 (23.2%)	0 (0%)
I have input into administrative decisions that impact my work.	28 (7.9%)	82 (23.1%)	99 (27.9%)	88 (24.8%)	55 (15.5%)	3 (0.8%)
I have sufficient time to work with my clients.	12 (3.4%)	68 (19.2%)	110 (31.1%)	114 (32.2%)	28 (7.9%)	22 (6.2%)
There is a good deal of teamwork and cooperation between employees at my agency.	11 (3.1%)	29 (8.2%)	74 (20.9%)	138 (39.0%)	100 (28.2%)	2 (0.6%)
People in my community appreciate the work that social workers do.	11 (3.1%)	51 (14.3%)	134 (37.6%)	126 (35.4%)	33 (9.3%)	1 (0.3%)
People in my community view social workers as professionals.	4 (1.1%)	39 (11.0%)	108 (30.3%)	163 (45.8%)	42 (11.8%)	0 (0%)
If I had the decision to make again, I would go into social work.	16 (4.5%)	48 (13.5%)	64 (18.0%)	96 (27.0%)	130 (36.5%)	0 (0%)

Table 8. Level of Agreement Regarding Aspects of Current Practice in a Non-Rural Setting

Aspect of Current Practice	Level of Agreement (1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)					
	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
I have sufficient control over my own work schedule.	8 (2.7%)	11 (3.7%)	41 (13.7%)	98 (32.8%)	140 (46.8%)	1 (0.3%)
My present salary is satisfactory.	29 (9.7%)	48 (16.0%)	76 (25.3%)	93 (31.0%)	54 (18.0%)	0 (0%)
I am satisfied with the types of activities I do on my job.	1 (0.3%)	15 (5.0%)	54 (18.0%)	148 (49.3%)	81 (27.0%)	1 (0.3%)
I think I could do a better job if I did not have so much to do all the time.	12 (4.0%)	46 (15.3%)	71 (23.7%)	85 (28.3%)	75 (25.0%)	11 (3.7%)
I wish I had more to do.	192 (64.0%)	62 (20.7%)	27 (9.0%)	6 (2.0%)	5 (1.7%)	8 (2.7%)
I have to travel too much for my job.	153 (51.5%)	66 (22.2%)	40 (13.5%)	13 (4.4%)	3 (1.0%)	22 (7.4%)
There is too much paperwork required of me.	25 (8.5%)	54 (18.3%)	82 (27.8%)	72 (24.4%)	61 (20.7%)	1 (0.3%)
I have input into administrative decisions that impact my work.	34 (11.6%)	50 (17.1%)	81 (27.6%)	69 (23.5%)	56 (19.1%)	3 (1.0%)
I have sufficient time to work with my clients.	15 (5.1%)	56 (18.9%)	97 (32.7%)	80 (26.9%)	27 (9.1%)	22 (7.4%)
There is a good deal of teamwork and cooperation between employees at my agency.	7 (2.3%)	25 (8.4%)	64 (21.4%)	104 (34.8%)	96 (32.1%)	3 (1.0%)
People in my community appreciate the work that social workers do.	6 (2.0%)	27 (9.1%)	131 (44.3%)	110 (37.2%)	21 (7.1%)	1 (0.3%)
People in my community view social workers as professionals.	4 (1.3%)	18 (6.1%)	97 (32.7%)	151 (50.8%)	27 (9.1%)	0 (0%)
If I had the decision to make again, I would go into social work.	9 (3.0%)	29 (9.8%)	72 (24.3%)	81 (27.4%)	105 (35.5%)	0 (0%)

Social Work Education

Preparation for practice

Survey participants were asked to indicate “yes,” “somewhat,” or “no” to the statement, “*I feel that my social work education did a good job of preparing me for my social work career.*” Four hundred (58.3%) answered yes, 224 (32.7%) answered somewhat, and 21 (3.1%) answered no. Respondents were asked to explain their response. There were approximately 290 written explanations. These written responses were analyzed, resulting in the following themes:

1. Social work education, particularly in its generalist knowledge and skill orientation, offered a good foundation for practice.
2. In the context of social work education, internships and hands-on experiences were most helpful for career preparation.
3. Despite the foundational value of formal social work education, “on-the-job training” is essential to practice competence.
4. Social work education programs could provide better preparation for practice by:

- offering more “hands-on” experiences in the form of field experiences, internships, and/or multiple practica;
- discussing the amount and type of paperwork/documentation requirements in practice settings and offering practical documentation experience;
- offering additional content related to entitlement programs, fields of practice, and resources/services available in the field; and
- providing more “real world” experience related to direct service and clinical skills.

Recommendations for improved rural practice preparation

Survey participants were asked to write a response to the question, “*Are there particular ways that social work education could better prepare social workers for **rural** practice?*” Forty-two (42) responses were recorded. These written responses were analyzed, resulting in the following themes:

1. Rural internships could better prepare students for work in rural areas.
2. Social work education could better prepare students for rural practice through enhanced student knowledge of issues common to rural practice (e.g. limited resources, dual relationships, poverty, rural lifestyle) and through greater skill development (e.g.. networking, problem solving, administrative skills).
3. Additional rural preparation strategies by social work training programs could include: a rural social work course; a minor or certificate in rural social work practice; financial support for rural internships; and specialized training (e.g. child welfare).

Suggestions to social work students interested in rural practice

Forty-seven (47) responses were written to the statement, “*My suggestions to social work students interested in rural practice.*” Analysis of these responses resulted in the following theme: Social workers’ suggestions to social work students interested in rural practice included both pre-practice, practice, and personal advice.

1. Pre-practice advice included:
 - a. Doing a rural internship
 - b. Focusing on personal goals and being aware of the realities of rural life
 - c. Being well prepared educationally (study content related to gerontology, disabilities, vulnerable adults, and learn about different arenas of practice)
2. Practice advice included recommendations related to rural communities, colleagues and agencies, and rural social work practice:
 - a. Learn about poverty
 - b. Understand the community’s values
 - c. Get to know community members
 - d. Find a mentor
 - e. Learn about the quality of supervision you will receive at an agency
 - f. Speak up at your agency
 - g. Ask for help
 - h. Stand firm on social work values/ethics
 - i. Join the National Association of Social Workers (NASW)
 - j. Use technology to develop professional skills
 - k. Develop professional networks

1. Be creative in developing resources
3. Personal advice included suggestions regarding personal life and attitude:
 - a. Balance work and play
 - b. Practice a healthy lifestyle
 - c. Have a good vehicle
 - d. Don't go to the bar to socialize
 - e. Find a significant other locally
 - f. Be patient
 - g. Measure success in small steps
 - h. Be mature and self-motivated
 - i. Be open to change

Summary of Phase 2 Findings

For the most part, social workers practicing in the rural and frontier areas of North Dakota appear to enjoy their practice. However, a small percentage of the respondents in this study did not enjoy practicing social work in a rural area and 8% (n=28) of participants expressed a desire to work in more urban areas. The majority of individuals practice in the family and children services, information and referral, mental health, and gerontological fields. Respondents indicated that the opportunity to practice social work in a rural state afforded them the opportunity to become familiar with various community and regional resources, utilize a variety of social work tasks in their employment setting, develop professional relationships and networks, and develop creative ways to deliver services.

However, practicing rural social work in North Dakota presented some significant challenges. Perhaps the greatest challenge is the perception that not enough services exist for clients. The lack of services for clients, high caseloads, burnout and stress, and the need to be a generalist social worker are extreme challenges for rural social workers and may lead to a desire to move away from rural communities to more urban settings.

Noteworthy is the significant number of respondents (75%) who indicated that they practice at the Licensed Social Worker (LSW) level. A bachelor's degree in Social Work (BSW) is the terminal degree required to become an LSW and is the educational foundation that prepares practitioners for entry-level generalist practice. The BSW degree, then, is the most common practice degree in North Dakota as indicated in the findings of this survey. The North Dakota Board of Social Work Examiners reported in mid-August 2011 that 2,376 professionals were licensed to practice social work in the state, with 1,799 (75%) being licensed at the LSW level. Other licensees practice at the graduate (MSW) level. The survey respondents are, therefore, representative of the largest group of licensed social workers and are prepared as generalist practitioners. Also, 89% of the respondents are employed full time. The respondents that work in rural areas stated they are generally satisfied with their work, although 11% stated they wish or plan to move to an urban area, and 5% are thinking about leaving the social work profession altogether.

The findings of this study indicate that higher salaries, better and more fringe benefits, and upward job mobility are the most important incentives that would continue to make rural social work practice attractive.

Findings from the study also indicate that additional exposure to rural practice through supplementary rural content in courses, a course in rural social work, rural internships, in-class speakers, field trips, and service-learning experiences, are important in the preparation of social work students for rural practice.

PHASE 3: Survey of North Dakota Social Service Agency Administrators or Their Representatives

3.1 Participants

An online survey link was e-mailed to 310 North Dakota social service agency administrators or their representatives. One hundred fifty-six (156) individuals started the survey, and 98 completed the survey. The survey asked respondents to indicate their position at their agency. Of the 113 responses to this question, 83 (74%) indicated they were Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Executive Directors, Administrators, or Directors. Fourteen (12%) were Program Directors or Managers, eight (7%) were Human Resource personnel, and eight (7%) held other staff positions.

3.2 Findings

Survey respondents were asked to provide information about their agencies and their social work workforce, including recruitment and retention of social workers. They were also asked for their general perceptions of the North Dakota social work workforce.

Agency Information

One hundred thirteen (113) respondents answered the question about which North Dakota counties their agencies serve. Thirty-two (32) respondents indicated that their agencies served all counties. The remaining responses listed specific counties served by their agencies.

Tables 9, 10, 11, and 12 provide additional information about educational level of agency directors, agency auspice, populations served, and types of services provided. The percentages reported in the following tables are reflective of 113 respondents who provided information about their agencies.

Table 9. Educational Level of Agency Directors

Last Degree Earned by Agency Executive Director	n (%)
BA or BS	40 (35.4%)
MS or MA	27 (23.9%)
Other (responses included MD, JD, MBA, RN and Med)	19 (16.8%)
BSW/BSSW	11 (9.7%)
MSW/MSSW	11 (9.7%)
PhD	4 (3.5%)
Less than a bachelor's degree	1 (0.9%)

Table 10. Auspice of Employing Agency

Description of Employing Agency	n (%)
Private, non-profit	51 (45.1%)
Other (e.g. court, community facility, corrections)	37 (32.7%)
State social services provider	8 (7.1%)
Public social services provider	4 (3.5%)
County social services provider	3 (2.7%)
Tribal social services provider	3 (2.7%)
Private, for-profit social services provider	3 (2.7%)
Federal social services provider	2 (1.8 %)

Table 11. Populations Served

Populations Served (Check all that apply)	n (%)
Adult	73 (64.6%)
Elderly	70 (61.9%)
Children	68 (60.1%)
Youth	65 (57.5%)
Families	58 (51.3%)
Veterans	42 (37.2%)
Other (e.g. offenders, people with disabilities, nursing home residents)	16 (14.2%)

Table 12. Types of Services Provided

Types of Services Offered by Agency (Check all that apply)	n (%)
Information and Referral	59 (52.2%)
Health and Rehabilitation	41 (36.3%)
Other (e.g. hospice, offender services, home health, employment)	37 (32.7%)
Gerontological Services	34 (30.1%)
Mental Health Services	31 (27.4%)
Developmental Disability Services	27 (23.9%)
Family and Children Services	24 (21.2%)
School/Education Services	23 (20.3%)
Income Maintenance	17 (15%)
Juvenile and/or Adult Corrections	13 (11.5%)
Addiction Counseling	12 (10.6%)
Violence and Abuse Services	10 (9.0%)
Occupational Social Work	4 (3.5%)

Agency Social Work Staff

The total number of permanent or temporary full-time or part-time social work positions reported by 90 respondents was 412. Figure 7 below shows the average number of social work positions across the agencies who responded to the survey.

Of 91 agencies responding to a question about social work “designees,” 31 (34%) reported employing “designees” (see Figure 8 below). Positions for which designees were used included nursing staff, “program coordinators,” “children’s special health services staff, “Qualified

Mental Retardation Professionals (QMRPs),” “household coordinators,” “family support workers,” and “case assistants.”

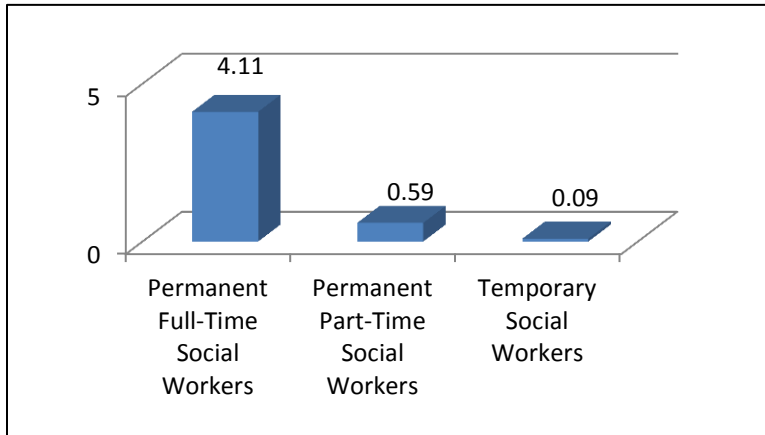


Figure 7. Average Number of Social Work Positions Across Agencies

Eleven agencies (12.1%) also reported reclassifying social work positions so that a social work degree would not be required for the position (see Figure 9).

When asked for beginning salary of BSWs, answers ranged from \$12 per hour to \$50,964 per year. When asked for beginning salary of MSWs, answers ranged from \$13 per hour to \$60,000 per year.

Those agencies who said that they had reclassified social work positions (Figure 9) stated they had done so in order to acquire “billable” providers, to hire individuals with more advanced skills and knowledge than typically found in social workers, to allow other qualified individuals to fill the positions, because of funding changes, and because of an inability to find a licensed social worker.

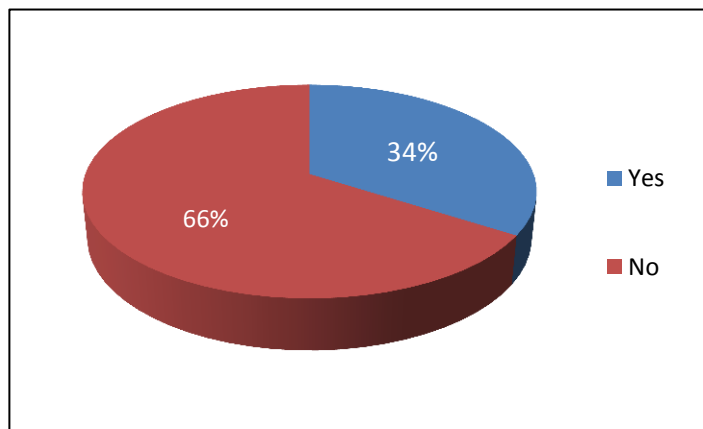


Figure 8. Percentage of Participants with Social Work Designees at Their Agencies

The survey also asked if agencies anticipated eliminating social work positions. As can be seen in Figure 10, 96% (n=79) said no.

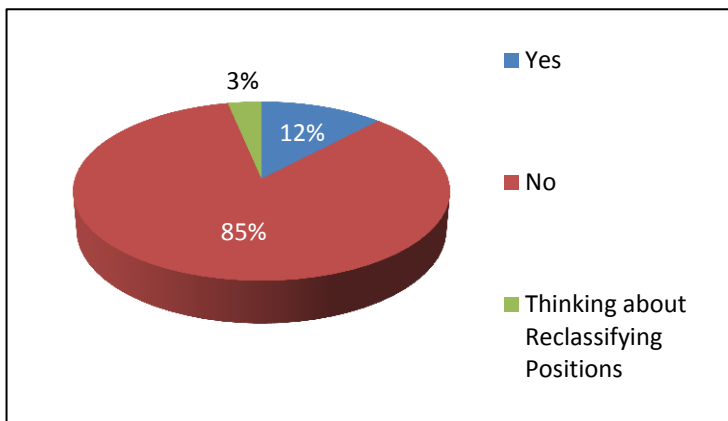


Figure 9. Percentage of Participants Who Have Reclassified a Social Work Position So That a Social Work Degree Is Not Required For the Position

In response to questions about how many unfilled full-time social work positions they had, three agencies responded that they had two positions unfilled, three agencies responded that they had one position unfilled, and 84 agencies responded that they had no full-time positions unfilled.

Regarding unfilled part-time social work positions, two agencies had one position unfilled, two agencies had two positions unfilled, and 82 agencies had

no part-time social work positions unfilled.

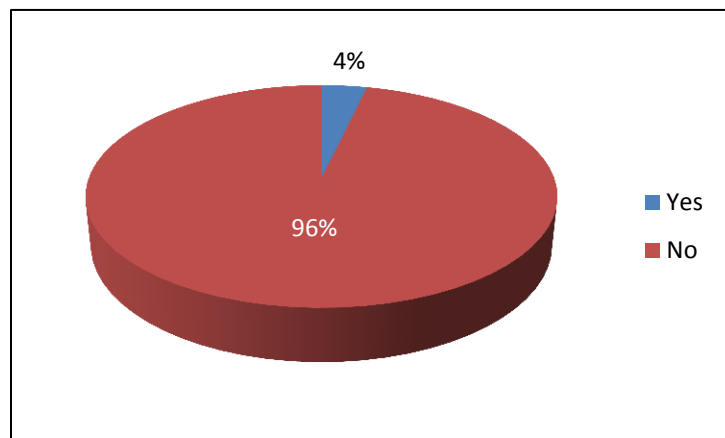


Figure 10. Percentage of Participants Who Anticipated Eliminating Social Work Positions

Agencies responded to a question about how many additional (new) social work positions they would like to fund in order to better meet client needs (see Table 13). Twenty-nine agencies (39%) indicated needing between one and six additional full-time BSW positions and fourteen agencies (23%) needed one or two additional part-time BSWs. Fifteen agencies (23%) needed one, two, or five additional full-time MSW positions, and three agencies (5%) need one or two additional part-time MSW positions.

Table 13. Number of Additional Social Work Positions Needed

Social Work Positions	# of Responses Corresponding to the Number of Additional Positions Needed							Total Responses
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
BSW Full-time Positions	46	15	7	2	1	3	1	75
BSW Part-time Positions	48	12	2	0	0	0	0	62
MSW Full-time Positions	49	9	5	0	0	1	0	64
MSW Part-time Positions	53	2	1	0	0	0	0	56

When asked what services they would want additional social work staff to provide, 62 agency representatives offered a long list of responses. These services included:

- Family services such as therapy, counseling, and parenting classes.
- Mental health services, including batterers treatment, crisis intervention, behavior management, conflict resolution, and counseling.
- Medical social work services such as assessment, coordination of care, grief/bereavement counseling, agency networking, and hospice.
- Direct services and advocacy for people with disabilities.
- Case management and service coordination.
- Care coordination for children with special needs.
- Support groups.
- Gerontological social services for nursing home residents.
- Drug and alcohol intervention services.
- Youth services.
- Probation case management.
- Community education and outreach.

Recruitment of Social Work Staff

Several questions were asked about recruitment and retention of social work staff. As seen in Figure 11 and Table 14, the vast majority of social workers are recruited from within the state and the most popular methods used to recruit are local newspapers, the state employment service, and word of mouth.

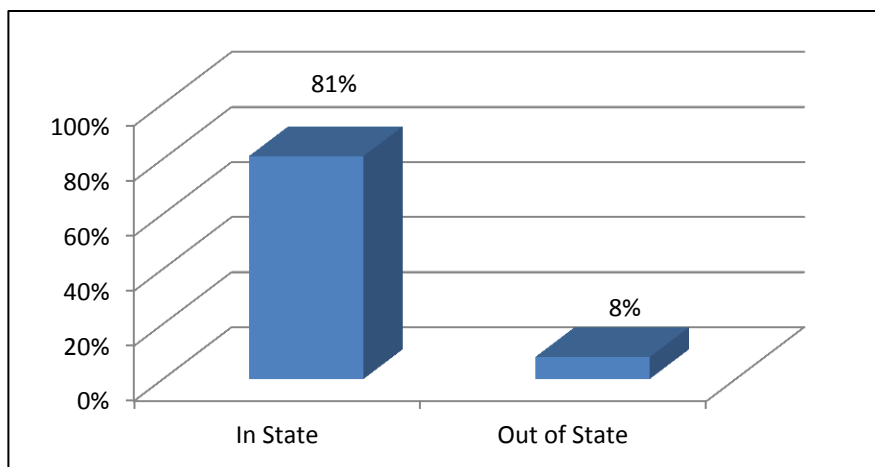


Figure 11. Areas from Which Social Workers Are Recruited

Table 14. Methods Used When Advertising for Social Work Staff*

Advertising Method (Check all that apply)	n (%)
Local newspaper	63 (85.1%)
State employment agency	47 (63.5%)
Word of mouth/informal connections	35 (47.3%)
Agency website	28 (37.8%)
Local-level professional conferences/meetings	15 (20.3%)
State-level professional conference/meetings	14 (18.9%)
Professional newspaper/newsletter	12 (16.2%)
University job fair	12 (16.2%)
Web-based job services (e.g. Monster.com, Jobs HQ)	11 (14.9%)
Listserv/E-mail groups	7 (9.5%)
Other	5 (6.8%)
National-level professional conferences/meetings	0 (0%)
Social media sites	0 (0%)

*Note: Percentages are based on 74 responses

Factors most important to recruitment (Table 15) included comprehensive benefits, competitive salary, support for continuing education and professional development, professional supervision, flexible schedules, and agency location.

Table 15. Factors Most Important in Recruiting Social Workers*

Factors	Level of Importance	n (%)
Comprehensive benefits	Very Important	50 (68.5%)
Competitive salary	Very Important	39 (52.7%)
Support for continuing education	Very Important	32 (43.2%)
Support for professional development	Somewhat Important	35 (46.7%)
Provide supervision to support/maintain licensure	Somewhat Important	31 (42.5%)
Offer part-time/flexible schedule	Somewhat Important	31 (42.5%)
Your agency's location	Somewhat Important	31 (41.9%)
Access to agency vehicle	Somewhat Not Important	22 (29.7%)

*Note: Percentages are based on 73 responses

Seventy-seven (77) participants responded to a question about hiring difficulties, with 26% (n=20) indicating that they have experienced difficulties hiring social work staff (see Figure 12). BSW staff were reported as the most difficult to hire (see Figure 13). Respondents were asked to explain why they had difficulty hiring social work staff. Their responses indicated that positions needed billable credentials, that there was a shortage of good candidates, that salaries were too low, that some positions, such as QMRPs, did not require social workers, and that the rural location of the work made it difficult to attract employees.

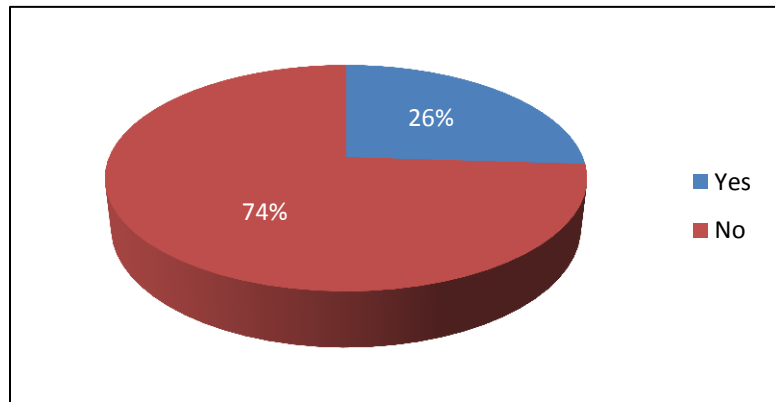


Figure 12. Percentage of Participants Who Have Experienced Difficulties Hiring Social Work Staff

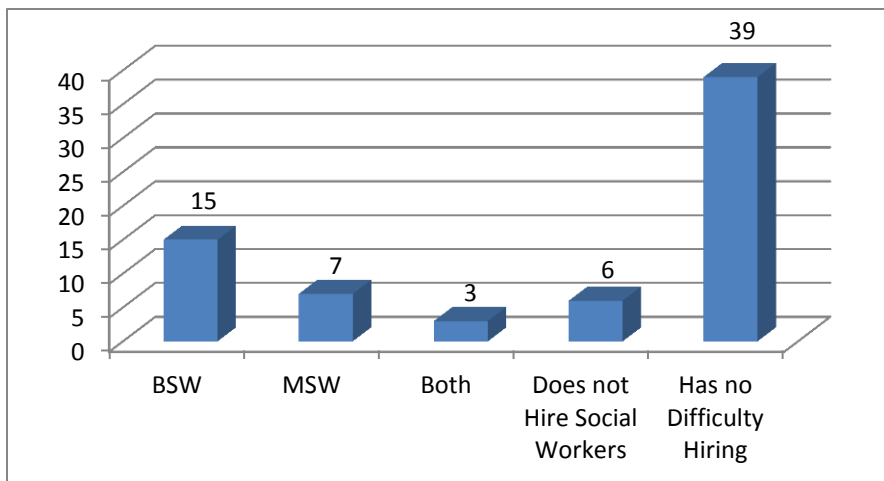


Figure 13. Social Work Staff Who Were Most Difficult to Hire

Retention of Social Work Staff

Regarding retention of employees, respondents indicated several factors that contributed to their ability to retain staff. As seen in Table 16, these factors included flexible schedules, support for continuing education and professional development and increased salary.

Table 16. Aspects Most Important in Retaining Employees*

Aspects	Level of Importance	n (%)
Offer part-time/flexible schedule	Very Important	30 (44.1%)
Financial support for continuing education**	Very Important	25 (36.8%)
Financial support for professional development	Somewhat Important	36 (52.9%)
Increased salary	Somewhat Important	35 (51.4%)
Increased/additional benefits	Somewhat Important	30 (44.1%)
Provide professional supervision to support/maintain licensure	Somewhat Important	27 (39.7%)
Access to agency vehicle	Not Very Important	18 (26.4%)

Notes: *Percentages are based on 68 responses; **BiModal: Somewhat Important 25 (36.8%).

As can be seen in Figure 14, out of the 92 administrators surveyed, the majority of respondents, or 58.7% (n=54), anticipated being able to fill social work positions over the next five years. Those who did not anticipate being able to fill social work positions indicated that this was either because positions did not require a social work degree or, as one person noted, because housing was a problem in the area.

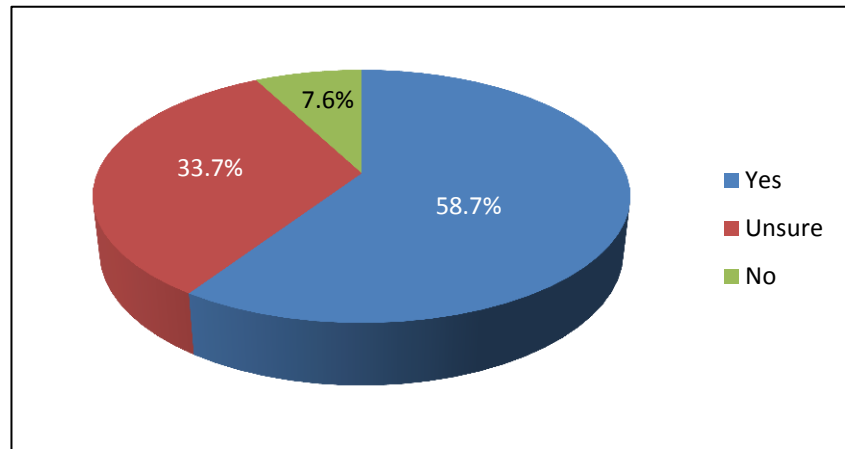


Figure 14. Percentage Response on Ability to Fill Social Work Positions over the Next Five Years

Although agency respondents were generally confident about recruitment and retention of social workers, 62 individuals provided a response to the question, “*What do you consider to be the most serious problems related to hiring and retaining social work staff?*”

An analysis of the responses resulted in the following summary list:

- Not being able to pay a competitive salary – this was by far the most common answer with 25 responses indicating salary as a serious problem.
- Rural location – multiple answers cited geographic location and rural issues such as lack of available housing and amount of travel required as barriers to recruitment and retention.
- Reduction in staffing due to budget cuts and simultaneous prioritization of healthcare staff.
- Increasing prevalence of drug/alcohol issues.
- Changing regulatory rules and requirements.

Perceptions of the North Dakota Social Work Workforce

Interestingly, at the same time that agency respondents (N=78) indicated minimal difficulty hiring social work staff, 42.3% (n=33) felt that there was a shortage of social workers (BSW or MSW) in North Dakota (Figure 15). When asked in which geographic areas the shortage existed, the most frequent response was “rural areas,” with “northwest North

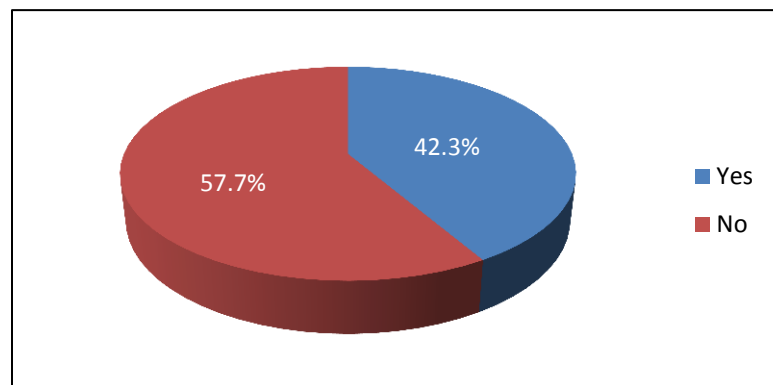


Figure 15. Percentage of Participants Who Feel There Is a Shortage of Social Workers (BSW or MSW) in North Dakota

Dakota” and “western North Dakota” also appearing as frequent responses. One respondent commented that “most of the state is designated as a mental health professional shortage area.”

Respondents felt that the greatest shortages of social workers (Table 17) were in mental health services (55.8%; n=29), family and children’s services (48.1%; n=25), violence and abuse services (44.2%; n=23), addiction counseling (40.4%; n=21), and school/educational services (28.8%; n=15).

Table 17. Fields of Practice with a Shortage of Social Workers*

Field of Practice (Check all that apply)	n (%)
Mental Health Services	29 (55.8%)
Family and Children Services	25 (48.1%)
Violence and Abuse Services	23 (44.2%)
Addiction Counseling	21 (40.4%)
School/Educational Services	15 (28.8%)
Gerontological Services	14 (26.9%)
Juvenile and/or Adult Corrections	13 (25.0%)
Information and Referral	11 (21.2%)
Community Development	10 (19.2%)
Health and Rehabilitation	8 (15.4%)
Income Maintenance	7 (13.5%)
Occupational Social Work	6 (11.5%)

* Note: Percentages are based on 52 responses

Preparation for Practice

The authors of the study were also interested in finding out if agency directors or their representatives perceived social work practitioners to be prepared for practice. As shown in Figure 16 and Table 18, most respondents agreed that social work staff arrived prepared to provide effective services and the basic skill level of social workers was rated as adequate in almost all skill areas.

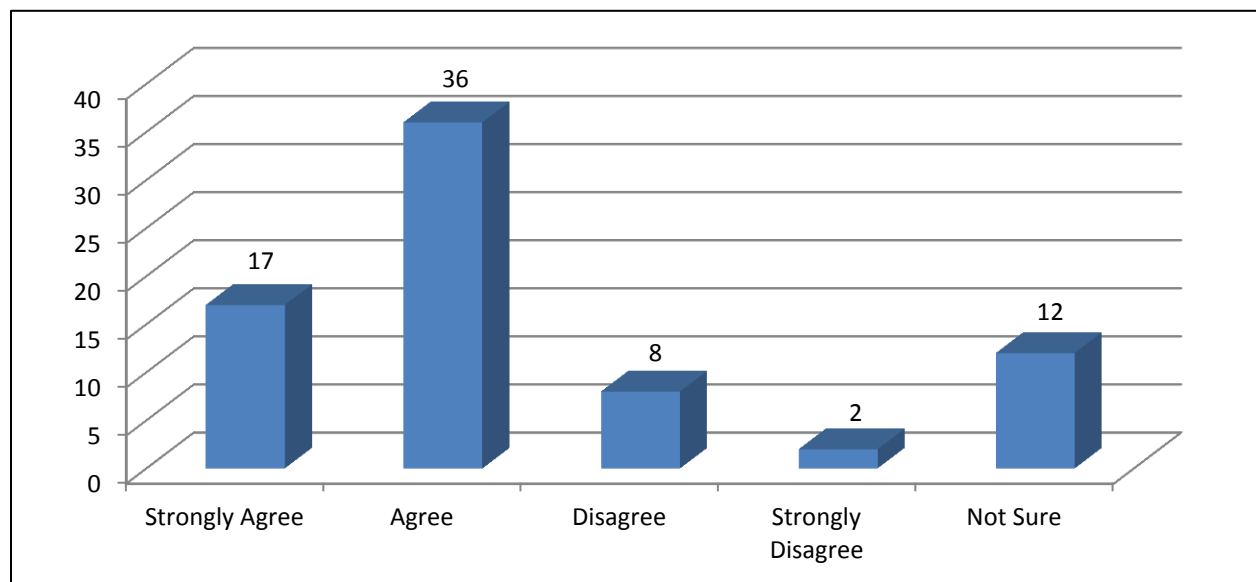


Figure 16. Participants’ Level of Agreement that Social Work Staff Hired at Their Agencies Arrived Prepared to Provide Effective Services to Clients

Table 18. Participants' Rating of the Skill Level of Social Workers upon Arrival at Agencies*

Skill Area	Most Frequently Chosen Response	n (%)
Team abilities	Excellent	36 (50.0 %)
Trainability for new skills	Excellent	34 (47.2%)
Clinical skills	Adequate	44 (61.1%)
Critical thinking and judgment	Adequate	43 (59.7%)
Community work	Adequate	41 (56.9%)
Written communication	Adequate	40 (55.5%)
Problem solving skills	Adequate	39 (54.2%)
Cultural competence	Adequate	39 (54.2%)
Verbal communication	Adequate	39 (54.2%)
Research skills	Adequate	39 (54.2%)
Case management skills	Adequate	38 (52.7%)
Networking skills	Adequate	36 (50.0%)
Program/service development	Adequate	36 (50.0%)

* Note: Percentages are based on 72 responses

When asked how social work education programs could better prepare social workers for practice, 55 respondents gave answers that were analyzed, resulting in the following themes:

Students need additional:

1. **Field experience** (“realistic field placements;” “more practical experience;” “more hands-on internship hours”)
2. **Macro knowledge and skills** (“A little more work on the business end—where funding comes from;” “Trained to recognize the significant role that data collection and analysis can have and implement that approach;” “Need some business skills as well as working with boards, strategic planning;” “Program development;” “Focus on advocacy”)
3. **Training in medical and disabilities social work** (“More exposure to field of disabilities;” “More educational opportunities for hospital social work;” “More capacity in medical social work;” “Understand aging and Alzheimer's”)
4. **Clinical skills** (“More practical experience with different therapeutic techniques;” “Minor in psychology would be helpful;” “Practical clinical skills;” “More skills with diagnostic and counseling theories”)
5. **Communication skills** (“Mandate creative writing courses;” “Better written communication skills;” “More training on verbal and written communication skills;” “Professional writing classes”)

Summary of Phase 3 Findings

These survey results inform social work agency administrators of a number of significant issues. Most noteworthy is the need to secure additional salary dollars for social workers. Also, to secure funds to hire additional full and part-time social workers where needs exist. The agency administrators who responded to the survey were clearly cognizant of these needs.

A finding of significant interest to the authors was the number of respondents who are currently using social work designees to fill potential, or actual, social work positions. Over one-third (34%) of the respondents indicated they were using designees. Respondents indicated that they

are using designees for “nursing,” “program coordinators,” “QMRPs,” “home visitors,” “resident and family service managers,” case workers,” and a host of other positions. This is clearly a threat to the social work profession and this issue needs to be part of the professional dialogue in the state.

Interestingly, the vast majority of respondents did not have social work staff vacancies although, as mentioned above, many of the respondents indicated they would want to hire additional social work staff if funds were available. Respondents did not express concerns about access to quality social work staff in the future. Not surprising was the perception expressed by respondents that the greatest need to recruit social workers existed in northwestern and western areas of North Dakota. The authors assume this is related to the impact of the burgeoning energy industry in those areas of the state.

This study provides guidance for policy makers, human service administrators, and social work educators around future directions and the authors offer the following recommendations.

Study Recommendations

Recommendations for Policy Makers

Policy makers should be aware that educational stipends have proven successful in recruiting graduates to rural communities. With appropriate legislative leadership, the Title IV-E Child Welfare Stipend Program could be replicated beyond child welfare practice to rural mental health services, for example. In addition, loan forgiveness and competitive salaries are primary and necessary incentives for recruiting service providers to rural areas. Policy makers can also support the development of additional technological tools that allow more services to be delivered at a distance and that ensure rural workers quick and routine access to consultants, colleagues, and professional networks. Finally, as policy makers are aware, continued collaboration with rural communities related to economic development initiatives will encourage the growth of various dimensions of community life, and the availability of a continuum of social services, that attract and retain workers at various stages of their careers.

Recommendations for Agency Administrators

For employers, wages must provide an incentive to live in rural areas, particularly more remote areas. This may mean offering wages higher than those provided in urban areas. Employers are challenged to educate their boards and commissions about the need for higher wages to assure that they can recruit quality professionals. In addition, it must be recognized that the current practice of declassifying social work positions in certain service arenas in order to hire para-professionals, such as “social work designees,” will not necessarily assure the same level of quality in service. This approach must be adamantly challenged by agency directors, supervisors, and the social work field in general. Employers must also ensure that quality social work supervision is available to assure professional services and to provide professional development activities that advance professional credentials and attract potential employees.

Employers should also be reasonable in their expectations about employees joining in the cultural and recreational life of a rural community. Professional employees in rural areas must be guaranteed at least a modicum of personal privacy. Alumni residing in rural communities

often stated to the authors that they do not wish to live under a microscope where they have little privacy and which makes managing boundaries even more difficult. Allowing employees to reside outside their work community is a necessary option. Also allowing some professional work to occur via synchronous internet interaction with clients is reasonable and has occurred with success (Krueger, Gibbons, & Northwood, 2004).

Recommendations for Social Work Educators

For social work training programs, the challenge is to expand how programs present practice in a rural community. Social work faculty need to ensure that, in addition to delineating the struggles, they highlight the changing complexities, the strengths, and the potential futures of rural communities. Competence in rural social work practice can be supported by following the suggestions of student respondents to this study which included developing courses about rural social work, diverse communities, and entitlements, providing increased hands-on experience in rural service provision, and ensuring routine outreach by rural agencies to social work students. As educators move beyond clichés about rural communities and become more intentional about discussing and celebrating rural practice, students will be excited and better prepared to practice in rural communities.

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