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Social Workers Are Joiners

By KATHRYN CLOSE

LIKE most Americans, social workers are natural joiners. They have their professional organizations, their unions, their national and state conferences, general and specialized. But in spite of all these a movement is gaining headway among social workers over the country for professional association in a broader form than that offered by the established organizations. Several states now have statewide organizations of social workers which require no special qualifications for membership except paid employment in social work and the desire for professional growth and development. Other states report many "locals" but no statewide organizations. For nearly a year an "independent" committee has been weighing the desirability of bringing the scattered state and local groups into a national organization.

With the great increase in the public social services and the great numbers of workers recruited for them this movement toward professional association at a realistic level is not surprising. If belonging to an association gives status then the newcomers on the social work scene are going to belong, if not to one association then to another. But the established professional bodies admit to membership only especially qualified persons, relatively few in comparison to the numbers actually engaged in the practice of social work. The unions, though they have made great gains in the past few years, still are limited largely to urban centers. The national and in most cases the state conferences meet only once a year and often are inaccessible to many workers because of time, distance and expense. To many a practicing social worker, social work is his own job with little relationship to the rest of the field. Yet he knows there is value in professional association and he means to get it if he can.

Today there are said to be approximately 75,000 practicing social workers in the United States. Some 11,000 of them belong to the American Association of Social Workers, 1700 to the American Association of Medical Social Workers, 550 to the American Association of Psychiatric Social Workers. Since the memberships of these bodies overlap considerably, there are probably upwards of 64,000 social workers with no professional organization affiliation. The figure, however, is only approximate as the number of unorganized workers is pretty much a matter of guess

work. It is safe to say, however, that it is several times the combined membership of all the organizations named.

As matters stand now with the professional organizations, the social worker "qualified" for his job by substantial general education and by special training in a school of social work may have the added stimulus to growth of organized professional association, while the technically "unqualified" worker whose only tool on his job is experience, not always trustworthy, is denied that stimulus. This, of course, is in line with the long established policies of the older professions, law and medicine, for example. In the young profession of social work, it is defended on the ground that only thus can hard won standards be maintained, only thus can personnel standards be raised in the public welfare services where most of the 64,000 "unqualified" are employed.

IN theory the 64,000 might go back to school for the requisite technical training and so qualify for the professional associations. But this, it is admitted, is far from realistic. The question, then, is how can these thousands with small opportunity for formal training but who are actually engaged in social work, many in positions of great responsibility, gain the advantages of association on a professional level? Can they, with their diverse, uneven backgrounds, be held together by so loose a tie as paid employment in social agencies? What will it profit them to confer over their common concerns? Can they by their shared purpose and their collective effort enrich their background and raise the general level of their performance?

Many among both the "qualified" and the "unqualified" think they can and in many places are trying out their faith concretely by stimulating over-all organizations of "practicing social workers" in their own communities and states. Though these local organizations have risen for the most part in areas where there is no active union movement to take up after-hours' time and energy, there is little evidence to support the charge, occasionally heard, that they have been promoted by conservatives as a means of discouraging union organization. The purposes of the two types of organization are different rather than conflicting. The one is designed to meet a need for association and self-study; the other a need for expression and protection.

An after-meeting confab out of which grew a state association for all persons employed as social workers illustrates the spontaneity that characterized the origin of some of these new organizations. Two years ago at the Florida State Conference of Social Work a handful of "unqualified" rank-and-filers sat around together, disconsolately discussing the conference's failure to meet or even to recognize their needs. "Why don't we do something about it?" asked somebody. "Why don't we find out what we need and if there are enough of us the conference will have to listen." So they did and the conference did, and now there is a Florida Association of Social Workers with twenty district groups covering fifty-nine of the state's sixty-seven counties, and with associate membership in the state conference. [See "Up by the Bootstraps," by Martha Parrish, *Survey Midmonthly*, August 1939.] Though the local units are bound together in a statewide organization, they determine their own emphases and programs. They are the real strength of the organization. Activities are not limited to lecture or panel meetings, but embrace studies, institutes, projects for social action—yes, even fun.

In Connecticut a similar organization also had a spontaneous origin, though of a different kind. Back in the old days of the FERA a group of public welfare supervisors used to get together regularly to discuss their common problems. After the FERA vanished, the supervisors' meetings continued and finally expanded to include visitors. Today, as the meetings of the Connecticut Public Welfare Association, they are open to anyone employed in a social work capacity in any phase of public welfare—relief, public assistance, probation, children's institutions and so on. There are now nearly three hundred members throughout the state. The organization is set up on the basis of district units, each one electing its own officers and arranging its own program. These programs follow the lecture or panel pattern and are often open to the public, as one of the organization's aims is to promote lay understanding of social work. The state association meets three times a year, putting on lively programs combining social and recreational activities with meaty discussions.

MANY members of the Florida Association of Social Workers and the Connecticut Public Welfare Association are also members of the American Association of Social Workers. Florida "professionals" believe the association is giving untrained workers a desire for and appreciation of training. In Connecticut many of the private agency workers have availed themselves of the privilege of associate membership (non-voting) in the Public Welfare Association, as through it they keep in contact with what is going on in the public field which directly or indirectly affects their own work. The state AASW chapter works closely with the association and on several occasions has called on its committees for consultation on studies.

Social work winds are strong, and seeds from the East are now flowering in Utah. There the Utah Congress of Social Workers, organized last September by a group which has been watching closely the development of the Florida association, already has five active chapters covering fifteen of the state's twenty-nine counties. All persons employed as social workers in public or private welfare agencies are eligible for membership. Local chapters usually are organized by members of the local welfare departments, but the stimulus comes from the central organiza-

tion. The state's executive committee assists in the organization of chapters, passes on applications for admission, plans with the chapters for state and local programs, coordinates the activities of the local units "to further the aims of the Congress." These aims as expressed in the constitution are "the promotion of constructive social work, the betterment of social conditions by discussion and action, the interchange of ideas and information on social questions, the development of personal acquaintance and fellowship of the members. . . ."

As in Connecticut, the practicing social workers' organization in Utah is on good working terms with the state AASW chapter. The two organizations have discussed the possibility of eventual affiliation, but all concerned are agreed that this should not be attempted at the expense of "lowering the standards and distorting the high purpose of the AASW."

SOcial workers' organizations with less defined professional requirements than the AASW are not new. Even before the sudden expansion of the public welfare fields and the resultant increase in numbers of technically untrained workers doing social work, there were many social workers' clubs which sprang from the desires of social workers of high and low estate to get together. The clubs were, however, strictly local in origin and set-up, and their functions frequently were limited to "social activities." With the great influx of newcomers to the field many of these old clubs have taken on new vitality and have expanded their programs to include panel discussions, lectures, and educational features. There are seven of these clubs in New Jersey, for example, but they have no common plan of activity.

In many of those states where there are no social workers' clubs or statewide organizations, the state conferences are moving to close the gap. This is accomplished through frequent regional meetings which afford social workers a regular opportunity to get together to learn from one another. These meetings differ from those of social workers' clubs, however, in that more often than not their programs aim at interesting the laymen and consequently cannot be too much concerned with professional methods and techniques. [See "State Conferences: Tools for Action," *Survey Midmonthly*, March 1940.]

Although the efforts of practicing social workers to come together into organizations which reflect their common interests have been numerous, they have been until recently more or less sporadic. The Russell Sage Foundation, after querying all the state conferences on the subject, learned from thirty-three replies that there are ten states with active social workers' clubs, seven in which the conferences themselves "meet the need," sixteen with "no consciousness of need" for this type of organization.

How long the practicing social workers in these sixteen states will remain unconscious of need is a question, in view of a movement now underway to organize on a national level. Initiated last year at the Buffalo meeting of the National Conference of Social Work and still in a somewhat nebulous state, the movement has proceeded as far as the formation of a national committee of twenty-two persons, all social workers in responsible positions, many of them members of the AASW. Instigated chiefly by Arthur Potts, state field supervisor of the Indiana State Department of Public Welfare, the committee's avowed purpose is to stimulate interest in organization at local

levels. First calling itself the Independent Committee to Study Professional Organizational Needs of Practicing Social Workers, it has recently boiled the name down to the Social Workers' Group Study Committee.

At the outset Mr. Potts defined the committee's aims:

To encourage the organization of all practicing social workers into local social workers' clubs; to study existing social workers' clubs and the relation "if any" between their location and that of professional organizations; to classify the persons in the various phases of social work—group work, statistics and research, community organization, administrative social work, case work; to analyze the education, experience and qualifications of sample groups of practicing social workers; to determine the geographical distribution of such workers; to sound out existing clubs on their desire to participate in one general professional association for all types of social workers; to analyze the cost of program operations, dues and related financial problems.

The work of the committee has been slow, chiefly because its members, while agreed on the fundamental issue—the desirability of "calling a spade a spade" by admitting that practicing social workers are, after all, social workers—are not as yet individually clear, in spite of the seven-point program, on what the committee's function should be. Many of them shy at the possibility of setting up a second professional organization to parallel the AASW and thus indicate a "schism" in social work. Others, although they see the importance of a national committee as a guiding spirit and clearing house for local organizations, doubt the efficacy of building from the top down rather than from the bottom up. There are also those who believe that the real answer to the problem is a limbering of the membership requirements of the AASW.

The attitude at the AASW headquarters toward this "national movement" is frankly skeptical. There is keen interest in the problem of professional association for practicing social workers as well as good will toward their efforts to solve it themselves. But, ask the AASW spokesmen, what can a group with interests and backgrounds as diverse as those of the practicing social workers expect to accomplish on a national scale that cannot be accomplished through the National Conference of Social Work or the American Public Welfare Association? They point out that many AASW chapters now open their lecture programs to all social workers in order to share their educational advantages. If what these workers want is stimulation through association then this can best be met on

the local level. If on the other hand, they are seeking prestige, what can they expect to gain from an organization which sets no qualification for membership?

In spite of outside criticism and its own misgivings the Social Work Group Study Committee is sticking together in the belief that, through further study and discussion, it eventually may be able to define its function clearly and proceed more vigorously. The success of consciously stimulated organization seems to belie doubts as to the efficacy of an "outside" approach. In Indiana last fall the state conference of social work was used by members of the committee as the machine for sowing seeds of interest in over-all social worker organization. Though the meeting called at the conference drew only a small crowd, the seeds already have become fruit in the form of eleven local clubs, with four more in the budding stage of organization. Only a few of these clubs have started holding regular meetings with "specific social work content" but they all are bound together by a tentative constitution for a state organization, soon to be tested by vote. According to this constitution the purpose of the state association is "to federate and bring into one compact organization the entire social work profession of the state of Indiana . . . ; to extend social work knowledge and advance the practice of social work; to elevate the standards of social work education, research and social investigation and to secure the enactment and enforcement of proper social legislation; to promote friendly intercourse among social workers."

If there is some disagreement among members of the professional organizations on what form social workers' clubs should take and on their ultimate value, there seems to be general agreement that their appearance is a healthy sign both for social workers and for social work. Wherever the clubs are prospering, top-ranking AASW members usually are found. Many such members join the clubs through a sense of obligation, for in them they see opportunity for bringing together all workers on an equal footing—the only status which provokes free discussion. Yet to say that it is all "give" and no "take" on the part of the "qualified" in coming together with the "unqualified" is hardly fair to either. After all, the majority of the "unqualified" are employed in the newest, most challenging and most rapidly expanding areas of social work. They have held their jobs through stresses and strains unheard of in the old days when social work, for the most part under private auspices, was relatively protected. Unless they are deaf and dumb, they too have much to offer.

Where There's No Will, There's a Way

By HOLGER LUNDBERGH

THE Swedish child is a collective heir, thanks to an inheritance law of 1928. This law provides that in cases of persons dying intestate, their property reverts to the government in the absence of near relatives. It also excludes cousins or more remote kin from inheriting. This wise and far-sighted act made possible the creation of a new government agency which has just ended its first decade of useful service. It was named *Allmänna Arvsfonden*, or the "General Inheritance Fund," and was made a branch of the Social Service Board. The money received by the Fund—to date some eight million kronor, or about two

million dollars—is used specifically and exclusively to "care for the growing generation, and to facilitate its future purpose of making a contribution to the common weal." It aims, in other words, "to fulfill in a special manner the social function of inheritance." Thousands of needy children, from infancy to adolescence and later, have benefited by it in manifold ways.

How well this new agency has worked out, and how sympathetically it has been received by the people, is best illustrated by one interesting point. In Sweden, a person without blood relations may by law will his property to