



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## They work to relieve suffering

**Social workers, nurses, community organizers deserve more respect**

Sunday, August 24, 2008

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By many measures, life seems to be getting more difficult for ordinary Americans. The subprime mortgage crisis has left millions of families without their homes, crippling entire communities in the process. Nearly 50 million people lack health insurance, and the number grows every year. About one of every eight Americans, including 13 million children, now lives in poverty.

Fortunately, there are people whose job it is to alleviate the effects of these hardships. They are social workers, nurses, community organizers and many others in the "helping professions." But despite the enormous benefits they bring to individuals and to society, too often the people in these occupations do not get the same respect as do other professions.

Consider salaries. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the mean annual salary for community and social services occupations (a category that includes substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors; child, family and school social workers and other jobs commonly referred to as "social worker") is \$39,000; for licensed and vocational nurses, \$37,500; for community organizers, \$37,000. That compares to \$150,000 for general practitioner medical doctors, \$113,000 for lawyers and \$66,000 for architects and engineers.

Of course, no one goes into the helping professions to get rich. Their satisfaction comes instead from making life better for others. Nevertheless, their comparatively low salaries are at least a partial reflection of the value our society places on their work.

The low status of these occupations shows up in other ways as well. For example, U.S. News & World Report, which provides the most comprehensive rankings of graduate and professional schools, ranks schools of law, medicine, engineering and management annually, while social work and nursing are relegated to once every four years.

Here in Ohio, state and local governments may hire individuals for human services positions who have no professional training, or even a college degree, and give them the title of social worker. It's hard to think of another profession requiring extensive training and certification where it would be permitted to use terminology so loosely.

Other states require that the title of social worker be used only by persons who have a professional degree from a school accredited by the Council on Social Work Education.

In those states, the public can be confident that the social worker who is assisting them has had appropriate professional training. Efforts are now under way to introduce similar legislation in Ohio.

While no one has studied why Americans hold the helping professions in low esteem, the reasons are not difficult to surmise. As a society we often equate pay with status, and salaries in the helping professions are comparatively low. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of people in these fields - 81 percent of social workers, 95 percent of registered nurses, for example - are women. And "women's work" of all kinds is often slighted in terms of pay and respect.

Finally, by their very nature, the helping professions confront problems, such as poverty, homelessness and sexual abuse, which most of us find difficult to think about. It is far easier to ignore the victims of the problems - especially since they usually lack power and influence - and by extension, the people who help them.

Jane Addams, the founder of modern social work, once observed, "The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life."

Social workers, and others in the helping professions, make the good a little less precarious for us all by aiding those who cannot secure it for themselves. For that, they deserve our thanks - and our respect.

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