

**Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work
Reinvestment Act (H.R. 795/S. 686)
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I am Jeane Anastas, and I'm a Professor of Social Work at the New York University Silver School of Social Work as well as President-Elect of the National Association of Social Workers. I was previously the Convener of the Action Network for Social Work Education and Research, which serves as the Steering Committee for the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative. I've been grateful to have the opportunity to work on the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act and would like to thank Congressman Towns for his tireless efforts on behalf of social workers and the people they serve.

As you've heard today, social workers provide services that help individuals overcome significant challenges, keep families safe, and promote the health of our communities. Social workers are the frontline workforce, our social safety net, and professionals whose investment in our nation has not only improved but has literally saved lives.

Every professional social worker can tell you about a time when they were thanked for "doing God's work," for taking care of vulnerable children, or for helping the homeless. Although the public doesn't always know exactly what social workers do, they do know that we help others. Every professional social worker, however dedicated, can also tell you about a time when they questioned whether they had the ability to stay in the career that they love. We have each held jobs where we were underpaid or have had far too many cases to juggle. Many of us have dealt with educational loans that we've found very difficult to pay off with those low salaries. Some of us have been threatened or assaulted on the job, and we've had colleagues who have been tragically murdered while at work. These challenges are threatening the ability of our nation's

social workers to provide indispensable services, services that, if not skillfully delivered, would severely limit our nation's ability to care for those who are struggling.

Social workers who earn lower salaries are more likely to work in challenging environments and to serve more vulnerable clients. They are also more likely to leave the profession. Because of these low salaries, many social workers find it difficult to overcome the burden of significant educational debt. A survey by the Council on Social Work Education found that the average loan debt of social work students graduating in 2004 with a master's degree in social work was \$26,777. Those with bachelor's degrees in social work faced repayment of \$18,609 in loans and those with doctoral degrees in social work were \$32,841 in debt.

Another factor that may prevent potential social workers from choosing this career, and that has forced others out of it, is the potential for job-related violence. According to the NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 44 percent of survey respondents said that they face personal safety issues in their primary employment practice. Social workers with the least amount of experience (less than five years) are most likely to experience safety issues on the job. In the same study, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration announced that more assaults (48 percent) occur in the health care and social services industry than any other. Social workers are asked to enter people's lives when they are facing difficult, emotional, and potentially life-changing situations, and, unlike police officers, they are often sent into situations without a partner or protection.

These problems are not the only ones the profession faces. In addition to challenges in recruitment and retention, the current social work workforce is older than in other occupations.

The NASW Center for Workforce Studies found that 29 percent of social workers are 55 years and older, compared with 14 percent of other workers in the labor force. In addition to impending retirements, the survey found that many social workers expect to leave their positions within the next two years. Retirement was listed as the most common reason for leaving (24 percent), but personal reasons and level of pay came in a close second (21 percent).

For many, social work is a calling, meaning that we may place our professional obligation to serve others before our own needs. Many of us will spend our careers being underpaid and overworked because we feel that we were born to be social workers. Since we launched the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative, one comment we hear is that it is selfish to advocate for ourselves and our profession. However, we are seeing experienced, competent social workers leave the profession because they simply cannot afford to do this work. We face difficulties in recruiting college students to be social work majors or to seek a master's degree in social work because of these challenges that they may be faced with when they enter the field. This situation is untenable for a profession that the Bureau of Labor Statistics expects to grow faster than average. If there are not enough social workers to fill the need, the repercussions of this shortage will be costly.

Most people understand that teachers are necessary to our society, but social workers intervene when a child cannot learn due to a learning disorder or an abusive home situation. Nurses can provide direct health care, but social workers will step in to coordinate community-based services for them after a hospitalization, services that will keep them from being readmitted. Psychiatrists and primary care physicians write prescriptions for medications that help in the treatment of many mental illnesses, but social workers provide the psychotherapy and case

management services that are essential for adherence to treatment and for recovery in all aspects of life. Prisons can house offenders, but social workers can provide drug and alcohol or mental health treatment and can help with re-entry into the community, reducing recidivism. Many professionals serve in the U.S. Congress, but social workers bring a unique skill set to their leadership, as exemplified by Congressman Towns and his social work colleagues in the House and Senate. The Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act will provide the foundation we need to recruit and retain the social workers of the future who serve so many of our people.