



**Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work  
Reinvestment Act (H.R. 795/S. 686)  
United States House of Representatives  
Congressional Briefing  
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Remarks Submitted by:  
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I am Betsy Clark, Executive Director of the National Association of Social Workers, and on behalf of NASW, I would like to thank Congressman Ed Towns for his sponsorship of this Congressional briefing on the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act. We are proud that Congressman Towns is a fellow social worker and thank him for his unwavering support of the social work profession. We appreciate the opportunity to provide remarks on the most comprehensive piece of social work legislation ever introduced in the U.S. Congress. This bill is critical to the 640,000 professional social workers in our nation, and, more importantly, to the ten million clients served by social workers every day in the United States. I'd like to speak briefly about the history of the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative, and why we must continue to pursue passage of this legislation.

Since I began my social work career, and particularly during my tenure as Executive Director of NASW, my colleagues and I have witnessed workforce challenges that pose significant risks to the health of the profession, as well as the ability of social workers to serve their clients. These workforce challenges include public misperceptions of the profession, insufficient salaries, insurmountable educational debt, and serious safety concerns. There are countless stories of social workers leaving the profession in order to make a decent living, social workers drowning in tens of thousands of dollars in debt, and social workers being threatened, assaulted, and even murdered on the job.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics states that employment of social workers is expected to increase much faster than average and we must recruit an additional 100,000 professionals by 2016 in order to keep pace with demand for our services. Recruitment and retention of social workers

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must be a focus of the federal government, schools of social work, and employers of social workers. However, there are several barriers to making this a reality.

Social work students, graduating with their master's degree from a public university can expect to accumulate over \$25,000 in educational debt. The U.S. Public Interest Research Group states that "37 percent of public 4-year graduates have too much debt to manage as a starting social worker." This makes a social work degree an impossible choice for many students. The profession must not be unattainable for the best and the brightest potential social workers because of high educational debt.

In addition to balancing significant educational debt, social workers can expect to earn salaries that are incomparable to other public health professionals. According to the NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 60 percent of full-time social workers earn between \$35,000 and \$59,000 per year with 25 percent earning between \$40,000 and \$49,999 per year. Social workers who earn lower salaries are also more likely to work in the most challenging agency environments and to serve the most vulnerable clients. They are also more likely to leave the profession.

Social workers may also be leaving the profession due to serious safety concerns. According to the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, 70 percent of case workers report that front line staff in their agency had been victims of violence or had received threats of violence. Social workers are considerably safer when measures such as global positioning systems, self-defense training, and conflict prevention are implemented.

This was the foundation from which a coalition of professional social work groups, the Action Network for Social Work Education and Research (ANSWER Coalition), launched the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative in 2004. The overall goal of the Initiative was to secure federal and state investments in the profession of social work to enhance societal well-being. The full initiative includes several components including federal legislation focused on social work safety, training, and research, and 56 state and territorial plans, focused on issues such as title protection, licensure, reimbursement, and loan forgiveness. We are also extremely lucky to have Congressman Towns and Senator Mikulski serve as advocates for our profession by sponsoring the cornerstone of the Initiative, the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act.

The Social Work Reinvestment Act is an important response to the workforce challenges I've just outlined. The legislation has only become more relevant to our society since it was first introduced in 2008, and the profession was bracing for a rapid increase in demand for services to due the aging population. However, since that time we have witnessed into the worst recession of our lifetime. We are dealing with high unemployment rates, plunging home values, record numbers of home foreclosures, and stagnant wages. At the same time, important social services that individuals and their families depend on in times of turmoil have been eliminated. Social workers are often the last line of defense for people facing serious challenges to their livelihood. The social work profession is our nation's social safety net and that social safety net has grown to include and protect a diverse group of people of all ages and walks of life.

Before the Social Work Reinvestment Act was first introduced, NASW sought to persuade the federal government to conduct a study on the social work profession, but were continually met with a lack of understanding or interest in the long-term repercussions of a social work workforce unequipped to serve an ever-increasing demand for services and resources. Although nurses have been extraordinarily successful in their own reinvestment campaign, securing significant federal funding, and a variety of other professions have enjoyed Congressional attention and support, social work has not experienced the same regard.

There must be a serious analysis of the profession of social work by federal and state governments in order to successfully rebound from an economic climate which may otherwise permanently alter the social landscape of our nation. The Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act is the first step towards investing in the professionals who continually invest in the communities that need them the most.

My colleagues joining me today will discuss, in greater depth, the reasons why the social work profession is critical to our nation, and in need of a reinvestment. They will also elaborate on the challenges I have outlined and how the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act can help us to adequately address these issues and promote a healthier society.