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commentary

Need for professional social workers is critical

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The elderly in need of care will have to wait. Children being abused have to hang in there awhile longer. People with mental disorders may get help eventually, but not right now.

It's hard to imagine, but there's a growing possibility these situations could actually happen. There is an acute shortage of social workers in the U.S., just as the demand for social services is increasing dramatically.

The older population — people 65 years or older — represented 12.4 percent of the U.S. population in 2006. By 2030, this age group is expected to make up 20 percent of the population.

As the population ages, the need for health and social services will increase to unprecedented levels. Many social workers are members of the Baby Boomer generation and are expected to retire in large numbers over the next decade. Right now, there are not enough social workers to replace them, and this will exacerbate the already existing shortage of social workers.

The Arizona Legislature recognized National Social Work Day on Feb. 3, reflecting the fact that social work is the largest and most vital social service profession in the nation.

Social workers provide a wide array of services in areas such as mental health, child welfare, physical and mental abuse, aging, substance abuse and developmental disabilities. Often operating through governmental and non-profit organizations, social workers help people from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds through a wide range of settings. These include hospitals, schools, senior centers, nursing and personal care facilities, and personal residences, to name a few.

Along with the Baby Boomer generation, many other segments of our population also will be affected by the lack of social service and health care workers. Nearly 1 million children are victims of child abuse and neglect every year. Thousands of returning soldiers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other related issues. The school dropout rate in some communities tops 50 percent. And one in four adults has experienced a diagnosable mental disorder.

Job prospects are projected to be quite favorable for social workers throughout the next 20 years. The Bureau of Labor reports employment of



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social workers is expected to increase much faster than average for all occupations in this field through 2016. Yet the profession faces the difficult challenge of attracting and retaining workers due to issues in working conditions, including high case loads, low wages, meager benefits packages and limited career-advancement potential, as well as the costs of higher education.

"Clearly, the social work profession is at a crossroads," according to the National Association of Social Workers Center for Workforce Studies. "If there are to be adequate numbers of social workers to respond to the needs of clients in this decade and beyond, the sufficiency of this frontline work force must not only be ensured, it must be prioritized."

Arizona State University's School of Social Work is committed to this effort. We are the largest producer of professional social workers in Arizona through our bachelor and master of social work programs. The School is part of the College of Public Programs, the anchor college of the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus, with a component in Tucson.

Social service providers must join forces to encourage more young people to choose social work as their profession. Few professions offer greater rewards and benefits to society, and none offer a wider variety of career options.

We cannot allow ourselves to wait until we can only say to people in our communities who are in crisis: "We'll help you eventually, but not right now."

— Mary Rogers Gillmore is director of the ASU School of Social Work.