Needs and Challenges of Public Health Social Work Programs: Implications for Behavioral Health Workforce

Gary S. Cuddeback, Ph.D.
Misha A. Zorich, MSW, MDiv.
Robert H. Keefe, Ph.D.
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Access to high-quality, evidence-based care is paramount to the millions of individuals with behavioral health needs here in the U.S.

- Especially those with serious mental illnesses who experience high rates of homelessness, substance use, physical health problems and cycle in and out of emergency departments, hospitals, jails and prisons at great personal and social costs

The financing and delivery of integrated health and behavioral health care as well as the near critical shortage of a well-trained behavioral health workforce are pressing public health issues.
• Public health social work (PHSW) dual degree programs are on the front-lines training graduate students at the nexus of public health and behavioral health

• Currently, there are over forty PHSW programs across the country

• More information is needed about how these programs are structured, curricula vary, and their successes and challenges, particularly regarding the integration of public health and social work, in order to understand how these programs can best meet the emerging issues for the behavioral health workforce
Background (3 of 3)

• HRSA grantees from the University of Maryland, University of Pittsburgh and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and principals from the University at Buffalo, SUNY convened a two-day Public Health Social Work Summit

• PHSW leaders, directors of PHSW programs, leaders of national social work and public health organizations, and leaders from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), among other stakeholders, discussed the landscape of PHSW programs, the challenges to developing and sustaining PHSW programs, the challenges of improving the diversity of the behavioral health workforce through PHSW programs, and the future of PHSW
Objective

• Describe key challenges to developing and sustaining PHSW dual degree programs and discuss the implications of PHSW challenges with respect to growing the behavioral health workforce
Method

• **Design:** Prior to the Summit, attendees completed a brief survey about the needs and challenges of their PHSW programs and the needs and challenges of PHSW, in general.

• **Sample:** Fifty three Summit participants responded to the survey and answered questions regarding the need for PHSW program technical assistance and program mentoring and the challenges of developing and/or sustaining PHSW programs. Participants included PHSW program directors, faculty of schools of social work and public health, leaders of professional organizations, representatives from federal agencies, etc.

• **Data Analysis:** Survey responses were summarized and qualitative content was coded and grouped into themes.
PHSW Challenges – Costs

- **Cost and Financial Aid**
  - Lack of financial support and financial aid
  - Lack of financial scholarships for dual degree students
  - High-cost programs with limited financial resources
  - Financial obstacles for students who want to pursue dual degrees
  - Cost of financing ninety-six credits of study for dual degree programs is prohibitive
  - Students are graduated with significant debt
PHSW Challenges – Recruitment, Admissions and Enrollment

• Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment
  • Recruitment and enrollment despite heightened interest in public health
  • Attracting high-quality students
  • Attracting diverse students
  • Marketing PHSW program is limited
  • Limited marketing of PHSW program
  • Different admissions criteria, procedures, costs and dates (PH vs. SW)
PHSW Challenges – Courses, Curricula, and Advising

• Courses, Curricula, and Advising
  • Different semesters, credit systems, dates, class hours
  • Individualized advising to develop a comprehensive PHSW dual degree plan of study
  • Curriculum review to integrate public health and social work curricula
  • Advising often occurs independently and is not coordinated across programs (i.e., SW advising is separate from PH advising)
• Community Leadership and Integration
  • Communication between PH and SW
  • Administrative challenges make program integration difficult
  • PH and SW programs are not well integrated, need strategies to better integrate disciplines for PHSW students
  • More collaboration across programs and disciplines around leadership and leadership opportunities
PHSW Challenges – Field Placements, Professional Identity, and Employment

• **Field Placements**
  • Sometimes difficult to find placements that meet PH and SW requirements
  • Additional field placements are needed

• **Professional Identity**
  • More needs to be done to market PHSW, need competencies and standards
  • Lack of understanding about what PHSW is and what public health social workers can do

• **Employment**
  • Need more information about PHSW job opportunities
  • More information about value added with PH + SW degrees
Implications

• PHSW have the potential to infuse our behavioral health workforce with well-trained, high-quality students who have a unique perspective and skill set; however, there are barriers and challenges to sustaining PHSW programs

• Developing a working definition of PHSW, a standard set of competencies to be implemented across programs, and core curricular expectations across programs could help

• Strategies to market PHSW and attract high-quality, diverse students and strategies to assure these students can access dual degree programs without incurring significant debt are needed

• Stipends, promotion, and funding of PH/SW integration at the Ph.D. level would possibly produce more faculty to teach in MSW, MPH, and joint degree programs

• Strategies for MSW programs to partner with MPH programs at neighboring schools to create joint degree programs
Contact Information

Gary S. Cuddeback, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work
gcuddeba@email.unc.edu
(919) 962-4363

Misha A. Zorich, M.S.W., MDiv.,
Program Coordinator
University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work
maz49@pitt.edu
(412) 624-8150

Robert H. Keefe, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
University of Buffalo, The State University of New York, School of Social Work
rhkeefe@buffalo.edu
(716) -645-1230