Lack of Services in Rural Social Work: Ethical Issues and the Impact on Parenting

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Lack of Services in Rural Social Work: Ethical Issues, and the Impact on Parenting

By

Judy Zimbelman

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The unique set of challenges in rural social work adds new dimensions to social work practice needs. Issues of poverty, substance abuse, and mental health issues are often ignored in the rural setting. The conceptual framework used in this banded dissertation is the ecological model, which applies the concept of systems to apply when working with individuals, families, and communities.

The first product, a conceptual paper, identifies the impact of the lack of services on parents and provides creative solutions to establishing resources for parents in rural areas. The number of professionals working in rural areas is limited, there is limited funding to provide services, and distance that impacts availability of services. The lack of available services leaves parents in rural areas feeling isolated and unsupported; this affects their ability to parent, which in turn affects children.

The second product presents research from a systemic analysis of ten articles. In the rural setting, ethical issues are unavoidable, creating dilemmas unique to rural social work practice. This systematic analysis aimed to assess the research on ethical issues identified in rural social work. Dual relationships, boundary issues, conflict of interest, and competency emerged as the main themes. The idea of managing rather than avoiding these ethical issues rather than avoidance of ethical issues in rural social work continued to rise to the surface in this research.

The third product provides an overview of the presentation entitled; “Creative Solutions for the Impact of Limited Resources in Rural Areas on Parenting Ability” was presented at the South Dakota National Association of Social Workers conference on 03/31/17. Creative solutions for establishing resources for parents in rural areas are crucial for the functioning of
parents. This presentation identifies the factors that impact the ability of parents to provide adequate parenting specific to rural life and presents creative solutions.

This banded dissertation pertains to social work with parents in rural areas. Identification of ethical issues when working with parents in rural areas impacts social work practice.
Dedication/Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my DSW cohort with whom I enjoyed sharing the journey. I look forward to seeing you out in the Social Work world. Dr. Robin Whitebird, my banded dissertation advisor kept me on track throughout this experience. Her straight-forward approach with me was exactly what I needed. I especially want to acknowledge Teresa Beadlescomb, Shannon Cassidy, and Lisa Borneman. Without the relationship we shared among us, I truly would not have finished this program. My dear late grandmother, Bertha Adrian Tieszen, an example of a strong woman and the backbone of the person I am today continues to inspire me. As she said in a letter addressed to me on 06/27/81, “My dearest Judy: We’re hoping its not to hard for you whatever you have to do, keep courage there’s brighter days ahead.” I hear her voice daily when I struggle to persevere. I acknowledge my parents who demonstrated the benefit of hard work. Lastly, I’m thankful for my husband, Peter, and my children; Oliver, Livie, and Jonah. This has been a difficult experience for us all and now I am finished. I look forward to us spending more time together.
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Lack of Services in Rural Social Work: Ethical Issues, and the Impact on Parenting

The focus of this banded dissertation is rural social work with a specific focus on parenting in rural areas. Rural social work has unique qualities, different from work with other populations. Although there are numerous issues to consider when working with families in the rural area, the common factor that makes it unique is the rural setting itself. Working with families in this setting requires a specific set of skills. Social work curricula often focuses on work in urban settings, and social work graduates often gravitate toward these settings rather than rural ones. For the future of families living in rural areas, it’s crucial to identify what makes the rural setting unique and to teach upcoming social workers the skills required to be effective in this setting.

According to Slovak, Sparks, and Hall (2011), who use social work’s professional framework of social justice and change, there is evidence that rural populations are an underserved and a vulnerable group, and that limited resources compound the problems. Additionally, limited attention is paid to this population, both in written journals and social work education programs. The lack of both resources and attention affects how well families function. The social needs of families in rural areas are often considered to be less than those of families in urban areas, but this is not necessarily the case. Poverty, for instance, is a strong risk factor for children and is often a significant issue in rural areas (Shaklee, 2012).

Ethical issues in social work are identified throughout the literature. A gap in the literature, however, is how to manage these ethical issues when they are unavoidable. Dual relationships, for example, are typically unavoidable in rural areas, yet the literature often calls for avoidance rather than providing techniques for of managing these dual relationships.
Families in rural areas—particularly parents—are left with little support which impacts their children.

The cultural makeup of rural areas is changing and no longer are rural areas comprised only of one group. With these ongoing changes, professionals need to respond in ways equal to the needs of the community. Dual relationships, boundary issues, conflicts of interest, and competency are the ethical issues identified in product two of this dissertation. Responding to the ever-changing population in rural areas requires competency, one of the ethical issues identified. Therefore, social workers are called upon to remain vigilant in doing what is needed when working in rural areas.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework used in this banded dissertation is the ecological model, which, in social work, applies the concept of systems to working with individuals, families, and communities—an appropriate fit for rural social work. “Because ecological theory emphasizes the interdependence of organism and environment, it is especially suitable as a metaphor for social work, given our historic commitment to the person-and-environment concept” (Gitterman & Germain, 2008, p. 51). The person-in-environment (PIE) concept, an important piece of ecological theory, is evident in rural social work. Instead of linear thinking, ecological thinking involves reciprocity of person and environment. As social workers work with families, the focus is on the attributing factors and not only on cause and effect. Environmental factors, school and church influence, workplace and health concerns, as well as family involvement are all considered when working with individuals, families, and groups in the rural setting. The ecological model views the relationship between the person and environment as inseparable. A change in one system creates a change in the other.
PIE highlights the importance of evaluating people where they live. Using PIE when working with rural populations provides an opportunity to identify the specific stressors that affect a person and-of equal importance-the support systems in an individual’s life. Taking into account social, economic, political, communal, historical, religious, physical, cultural, and family connections when assessing a person and how they function in the rural setting is crucial when developing plans.

Systems theory can be used in tandem with PIE when assessing needs specific to the rural environment. Helping individuals from a systems theory approach means that individual problems are not seen as solely the responsibility of the individual, but are rather seen in context of the organizations, families, churches, schools, and other systems affecting that individual in the rural setting.

The ecological model is comprised of the person and the environment, along with the micro, mezzo, and macro approaches, and the model’s basic proposition start with these properties when conceptualizing a problem. One proposition of this model is that negative relationships between person and environment result in stress for individuals. Identifying the source of stress within one of the above systems helps social workers create a focused plan for the individual. If a life stressor can be perceived as a challenge, the individual will need less intervention. Culture, past experiences, personal strength, personality, and availability of resources all play a role in how a person approaches an issue. (Gitterman, 2008). The application of ecological theory when considering the impact of availability of resources on people in rural settings seems a good fit.

Parents do not function in a vacuum, but need support in order to be healthy functioning parents. The ecological model implies that all the systems in an environment must be considered
when evaluating a family and that without considering the impact of one part of the system on the rest, information is lost. It is difficult to properly evaluate parenting ability without taking all the systems into account. “Ecological thinking focuses on the reciprocity of person-environment exchanges, in which each shapes and influences the other over time” (Gitterman & Germain 2008, p. 53). When considering the numerous systems involved in the rural setting, ecological theory fits well.

Ecological theory considers resilience and protective factors, which include biological, psychological, and or environmental processes that help prevent a stressor or lessen its impact. According to Gitterman and Germain (2008) some individuals collapse from the pressures, while others seem to thrive. Therefore, developing resiliency in the face of life stressors is crucial. By anticipating these events and predicting stressors, social workers can help families and individuals. Protective factors such as temperament, family patterns, external support, and humor should be considered when evaluating a person’s ability to be resilient.

**Summary of Scholarship Products**

This banded dissertation has three products. The first product is a conceptual paper that describes what we know about resources available in the rural setting, identifies the impact of lack of services on parents, and provides creative solutions to establishing resources for parents in rural areas. The number of professionals working in rural areas is limited, there is limited funding to provide services, and distance impacts the availability of services. The lack of available counseling, parenting education, addiction treatment, domestic violence treatment, and other necessary interventions leaves parents in rural areas feeling isolated and unsupported; this affects their ability to parent, which in turn affects children. A critique of the literature is
conducted in this review. The focus of this paper is on the availability and consequences of a lack of resources.

Rural populations are often not seen as vulnerable, and little attention is paid to the poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues, physical health issues, and lack of resources faced by these populations. This review includes key areas in which the lack of resources in the rural setting affects the ability to provide parenting-areas which have implications for future practice and research. This paper serves to inform the research completed in the second project.

The second product of the banded dissertation is a systematic analysis of the research on ethical issues in rural social work, identifying ten articles for review. Ratings in three categories focused on identification of a clear question, clarity and useful information, and explanation of findings. Results of this systematic analysis demonstrate the need for inclusion of ethical rural practice in the social work curriculum as well as the need for additional research in ethical rural practice.

The third product is a presentation of the conceptual paper given at the South Dakota National Social Work conference. This presentation included information from the conceptual paper, and presented creative solutions for addressing the issue of limited resources available in rural areas.

**Discussion**

Social work in rural areas faces many changes both for families and for the social workers who serve them. Ethical issues in social work are often thought of as being applicable primarily to urban areas. The ethical issues in rural social work impacting the parenting and families continues to grow, yet there is little action towards change to assist these families. The ethical issues defined in product two of this dissertation do not end with definition only.
Avoiding dual relationships in rural social work is not possible; therefore, solutions are required to manage dual relationships. The lack of services demands solutions, not simply acknowledgement. Social workers need to be innovative when working in rural areas in order to identify methods of providing services.

The audience for the presentation in Product 3 had strong emotions about social work in rural areas, illustrating the deep concern they have for families in rural areas. They identified the increasing segregation between rural and urban area which creates more difficulty in securing resources for families. The lack of services for families impacts children and the functioning of parents and the division between urban and rural areas has implications for the politics and culture of our times.

**Implications for Social Work Education**

The inclusion of rural social work in the social work curriculum is important for the future of social work education, and the identification of creative solutions to working in rural areas is crucial for ongoing rural social work. Including rural social work in the curriculum results in social workers being placed in rural social work for field opportunities, and using technology and collaboration in providing field social work supervision creates field opportunities not otherwise experienced. The ethical issues identified in Product 2 demonstrate the importance of responding to dual relationships in rural areas, and of creating opportunities to provide services in these areas.

The presentation included opportunities in rural areas to “grow” young social workers in rural areas, and to provide supervision for social work students. Social work educators attending the presentation discussed the importance of providing these opportunities and ways to identify options. Field experiences not only introduce students to rural social work, but give them time to
relate this work to concepts learned through the curriculum. Often, the challenge of field experiences is identifying social work supervisors. Creating innovative methods for providing supervision would improve the likelihood of student placement in rural areas. Technology, for instance, provides opportunities for field supervision that could not previously be used, and the various forms of face-to-face supervision using technology make a difference in students’ experience of support. An additional approach is to use a task supervisor in conjunction with a social work supervisor; this is an example of collaboration, a tried-and-true skill in social work.

Identifying the different approaches appropriate to urban versus rural areas better prepares social work students—many of whom will go on to work in rural contexts—for professional careers. With this knowledge, they can make informed decisions regarding rural practice.

An additional area of focus in rural social work issues is that of cultural concerns. Rural areas are comprised of diverse populations. The need for cultural competency, a crucial aspect of social work, is evident in rural social work, and demands ongoing teaching and identification of specific cultural aspects unique to the rural population. Addressing cultural competency through trainings and workshops is important for ongoing effective social work practice.

**Implications for Future Research**

Future research in rural social work is crucial for advancing collaboration with people in rural areas, solving issues related to the lack of resources, and providing support for effective parenting. Although the presentation was specific to South Dakota, it is pertinent to rural areas in general. Simply acknowledging the problem of limited resources in rural areas is not enough.

The identification of common ethical issues in social work is an important start in establishing better practice in rural areas. Alternative methods of ethical practice involving dual
relationships need more research. Social workers providing services in rural areas are often isolated, and face major ethical issues of dual relationships, competence, boundaries, and conflict of interest. Studies related to this topic suggest additional ethics training and more attention being paid toward identifying creative approaches to working in rural areas. This is particularly timely in that the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) recently (2017) published a revision to its Code of Ethics, the first since 2008.

This banded dissertation in rural social work was completed with the goal of influencing others to identify and make positive changes in the practice of social work in rural areas. The presentation was crucial for meeting that goal. More scholarly contribution is needed, and presentations on this topic contribute to the advancement of rural social work.
Comprehensive Reference List


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The Impact of Limited Services in Rural Areas on Parenting Ability

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UNAVAILABLE UNTIL JUNE 1, 2019

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Abstract

Resources for families and parents in rural areas are often scarce, impacting the functioning of parents. This conceptual article will identify the impact of lack of services on parents and provide creative solutions to establishing resources for parents in rural areas. Services in these areas are limited by distance, funding, and the small number of available professionals. The lack of available counseling, parenting education, addiction treatment, domestic violence treatment, and other necessary interventions leaves parents in rural areas feeling isolated and unsupported, affecting their ability to parent and in turn affecting children themselves. Although research exists on the limited resources available in rural areas, there is little research on the impact of scarce resources for rural families.

Keywords: rural social work, dual relationship, rural practice, parentin
What Are the Identified Ethical Issues Facing Social Work Practitioners in Rural Settings?

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Abstract

Social work and ethics go hand in hand. In the rural setting, ethical issues are unavoidable, creating dilemmas unique to rural social work practice. This systematic analysis aimed to assess the research on ethical issues identified in rural social work by identifying ten articles for review. Ratings in three categories—identification of a clear question, clarity and useful information, and explanation of findings—were used to evaluate the articles. Dual relationships, boundary issues, conflict of interest, and competency emerged as the main themes and issues of how to manage these ethical issues rather than avoidance of ethical issues in rural social work continued to rise to the surface in this research. Results of this systematic analysis demonstrate the need for inclusion of ethical rural practice in the social work curriculum and for additional research in ethical rural practice. In order to provide ethical practice in rural areas, there continues to be a crucial need for creative solutions in offering services.

Keywords: rural social work, ethics in rural social work, boundaries
Presentation: The Impact of Limited Resources in Rural Areas On Parenting Ability:

Realistic Solutions

Judy Zimbelman

St Catherine University/University of St. Thomas
Abstract

Resources for families and parents in rural areas are often scarce, which impacts the functioning of parents. Creative solutions for establishing resources for parents in rural areas are crucial for the functioning of parents. This conceptual paper identifies the factors that impact the ability of parents to provide adequate parenting specific to rural life. An overview of this paper with specific solutions was presented. This paper provides an overview of the presentation, entitled “The Impact of Limited Resources in Rural Areas On Parenting Ability and Realistic Solutions” on March 31st, 2017 at the National Association of Social Work Annual Conference in Sioux Falls, SD. Attendees’ feedback and a critical analysis of the learning process is provided.

Keywords: Rural social work, parenting ability, limited resources
The conceptual paper presented at the NASW conference uses the ecological theory for conceptualization. Specific factors pertinent to rural social work were identified along with identification of specific solutions. Documentation of presentation acceptance and the presentation are found in the appendices.

**Overview of Presentation**

The conference presentation entitled, “The Impact of Limited Resources in Rural Areas On Parenting Ability and Realistic Solutions” was presented on March 31st, 2017, at the South Dakota National Association of Social Workers Annual Conference. The conference was held March 30th and 31st, 2017 in Sioux Falls, SD. The conference proposal was accepted in electronic form. Elements of the submitted conference proposal are provided including the presentation abstract, learning objectives and key words; and presentation proposal. The conference proposal is included along with learning objectives and key words. The presentation is discussed along with slides.

**Presentation Abstract, Learning Objectives, and Key Words**

Social workers are required to identify unserved populations and advocate for the underserved and overlooked populations. The theme for the NASW conference in 2017 is “Social Workers Stand Up,” identifying how social workers advocate for those who are not able to advocate for themselves. Identifying factors that contribute to lack of services in rural areas along with creative solutions fits well with the NASW theme. Participants will gain knowledge on the:

1. Encourage participants to identify the gaps in their area
2. Define how these gaps affect children
3. Identify creative solutions of how to provide resources
4. Develop a plan with professionals on how to create partnerships for working together

**Presentation Proposal**

Resources for families and parents in rural areas are often scarce. Because of the limited mental health and other services in rural areas, families often do not receive the support and services that is needed in order to provide a healthy environment for effective parenting. The lack of emotional support, counseling, parenting education, addiction treatment, domestic violence treatment, and similar services leaves parents in rural areas feeling isolated and unsupported, and therefore, affect their ability to parent, which in turn, negatively affects children. Creative solutions are necessary to establish resources for parents in rural areas as well as encouraging professionals to create partnerships to combat the isolation felt by providers working alone.

**Discussion of Presentation and Key References**

The presentation provided opportunities for social work professionals throughout the state of South Dakota to identify factors contributing to lack of services in rural areas. Twenty-three power point slides were used throughout the sixty-minute presentation.

**Introduction and Theoretical Stance**

Slides 1-5 described the history of social work being informed by urbanization, which gave limited voice to rural social work. Discussion of the focus being on drawbacks of rural social work rather than strengths was brought to the attention of the audience. The objectives of the presentation were listed. Factors that make rural social work unique were identified. Ecological theory was identified as the theoretical stance
used to make the argument of the need for expanded solutions to the lack of available services for people in rural areas.
Why Rural Social Work?

- History of Social Work began with urbanization
- Social programs are often geared toward urban populations
- Much of the population of South Dakota is rural
- The urban populations of South Dakota has rural roots
- Drawbacks of working in rural areas are often focused on rather than identifying the strengths of working in rural areas
Slide 3

Objectives for Today

- 1. Encourage participants to identify the gaps in their area
- 2. Define how these gaps affect children.
- 3. Identify creative solutions of how to provide resources
- 4. Develop a plan with professionals on how to create partnerships for working together.

Slide 4

History of Social Work

- Understanding of where we came from helps us to know where we are going
- **Jane Addams**: Started with working in urban areas, started Hull House in Chicago in 1889 to investigate and improve conditions in the industrialized districts of Chicago, problems that were created by urbanization and immigration
- Hull House set the foundation for social work in America
- **Mary Richmond**: Started with case work as a “friendly visitor”, while working as a director of a charity organization in New York City in 1909, she helped to implement social work programs
Uniqueness of Rural Social Work

- Detachment from other communities
- Lower population
- Limited amount of resources
- Less variety to choose from for goods and services
- Lack of anonymity
- Larger land mass
- Government programs are often based on urban populations
- Rurality has its own culture
NASW Statement

Slides 6-8 describe the NASW statement on rural social work, which includes information on social workers employed in rural areas.

Slide 6

- The caucus well understands that despite the charm of quiet life in the country, social workers practicing in isolated areas face more complex challenges than their counterparts in urban cities.
- Social workers in rural communities are paid less, have limited access to specialty services and deal with crisis situations more often, because prevention and early intervention services are not readily available.
- There are many people who need services too, with nearly 50 million Americans (17 percent) living in rural areas, and too few practitioners to adequately serve rural populations.
Continued NASW Statement

- Technology creates more access to services, trained social workers are needed to deliver that care. Three loan-forgiveness programs are available to social workers: the College Cost Reduction Act of 2007; the National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program; and the Higher Education Act. All have service requirements that vary from two to 10 years. Specifically, the College Cost Reduction Act requires 10 years of service, which can be a difficult requirement to fulfill.

- Sam Hickman, secretary of the caucus and executive director of the NASW West Virginia Chapter, “We want people to look at rural issues in the same way as minority issues, like a specialized practice.”

Continued NASW Statement

- Social workers often carry large student loan debt relative to their modest salaries, so the ease of loan forgiveness is imperative to retain a skilled workforce. Eighty-one percent of baccalaureate graduates, 80.5 percent of master’s graduates, and 65.5 percent of doctoral graduates have loan debt. The mean amount of loan debt ranges from $31,880 to $42,149, according to 2013 report from the Council on Social Work Education.

- “We need to make sure professionals are place-committed, not placement bound,” he said. This will be key to growing the social work workforce in high-need areas.
Slide 9

**Picture of rural SD**

- **Drawbacks:** Limited number of resources for families, limited options for professionals, dual relationships, backward thinking, limited opportunities, everyone knows your business

- **Strengths:** Dual relationships, limited opportunities, opportunity for creative thinking, close relationships, others watch out for each other

Slide 10

**Why does it matter?**

- In South Dakota: poverty of children
- As we graduate social work students from our programs in SD, we want to keep some of them
- Although we have Sioux Falls and Rapid City, much of SD is rural
- Many of the populations that we work with have rural history
- Many rural populations are marginalized
- Rural social work seems to not be “en vogue”, let’s change that
Systems in Social Work

Slide 11 describes how the micro, mezzo, and macro plays a role in rural social work. Identification of strengths of rural social work along with drawbacks are listed. The importance of bringing rural social work to the forefront is discussed with specifics on who the population is in South Dakota.

Slide 11

Micro, Mezzo, Macro

- Micro: working with individuals
- Mezzo: working with groups and communities
- Macro: working with the system
Risk Factors

Slides 12-14 discuss the risk factors and identified who are most at risk for not receiving services. Impacts on parenting with statistics on poverty in rural areas and the impact of poverty on parenting are emphasized. Information on women’s role in parenting and how factors that impact rural social work are often the factors impacting women. Slides 13 and 14 focus on parenting and how limited resources impact ability to parent. These slides provide information regarding women and how women in rural areas are often the primary caregivers of children.

Slide 12

Risk / Protective Factors

- Protective Factors
  - Close relationships, responsibility to others which in turn can be a protective factor
- Risk Factors
  - Aware of circumstances of others
  - Social Work as a profession focuses on strengths
  - Look for strengths that are not always immediately identified as strengths
  - Connection with family and community vs Isolation
  - Dual Relationships vs Ongoing support network
Impacts on Parenting

- Parents do better with support, not in isolation
- Natural accountability where there are people “watching”
- 18 of the 50 poorest counties in the nation are in Nebraska, ND, and SD (Cochran,)
- In the U.S., more than 500 rural counties are defined as persistently poor, defined by poverty rates that have exceeded 20% since 1960, 37 of these counties had child poverty rates about 45% in 1999, these counties are in the South, Southwest, and SD (Lohmann, 2005)

Women and Parenting

- Women are often the caregivers to children
- Rural women are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors (Wigington-Bice, Simons, & Huddleston-Casas, 2015)
- Rural poverty affects all the residents with the lack of access to knowledge, resources, and opportunities
- Without available resources, parents are forced to leave their children in situations that may not be appropriate
- Women living in poverty are even more vulnerable to the lack of resources or employment
Solutions

Slides 15-21 refer to creative solutions to limited resources in rural areas. Community helpers, use of technology, and collaboration were identified as solutions to lack of services. Discussion on the importance of incorporating rural social work into social work curriculum was included.

Slide 15

Community/Natural Helpers

- Why we need community helpers: They know about the community and family in ways professionals do not
- They understand the culture and neighborhoods
- More likely to hear about problems before the problems become severe so that interventions are the only options
- More able to provide long term support
Slide 16

What can Natural Helpers do?

- Skill Building
- Emotional Support
- Community Leadership
- Resource Acquisition
- Concrete Help

Slide 17

Community of Natural Helpers

- Not a new approach, “Social service professionals who serve rural areas need to develop practice innovations that do not tax the shrinking resources of their financially troubled communities” (Memmott & Brennan 1988)
- We need a fresh way to identify natural helpers and engage them
Technology

- NASW created standards of practice for use of technology
- Can be used for supervision of social work students in the field
- Counseling
- Staying connected with community helpers or support group leaders
- Connecting with other social workers or collaboration

Collaboration

- How can we as social workers identify others in the community for collaboration?
- When we are working with people from rural settings, how can we identify who to contact and how can we make them comfortable?
- Social workers can work with others in the community: ministers, other home-based workers, teachers
- Anytime we can make a personal showing, it makes a difference
Slide 20

**SW Curriculum**

- What do we need to do to prepare social workers new in the field?
- Field opportunities for students in rural areas
- Include discussions on rural social work

Slide 21

**What can Social Workers do?**

- View rural social work in a different light
- Collaborate
- Identify community helpers
- Utilize existing resources
- Community Organizing
- Staying aware of services throughout the state
- Remain active in community and with other professionals
References

Slides 22-23 include references.

Slide 22


References


