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# The Social Worker and Successful State Social Policy

Patricia Welte

*St. Catherine University*, [trish.welte@gmail.com](mailto:trish.welte@gmail.com)

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## The Social Worker and Successful State Social Policy

by  
Patricia N. Welte, B.A.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

Committee Members  
Lisa Kiesel, MSW, Ph.D., LICSW (Chair)  
Mary Nienow, MSW  
Stacy Husebo, MSW, LICSW

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

**Abstract**

The social work profession began not only with the inclusion of advocacy and social policy as primary components, but as the bedrock of the profession itself. Recent literature has raised alarms with regard to a diminished professional emphasis on macro practice. The purpose of this study was to identify lessons that social workers may learn from those social workers who are participating in successful macro social work, as well as how their differing role perspectives may impact these efforts. Using a qualitative design, eight social workers were interviewed regarding their successful social policy, career trajectory, and perspectives regarding their social work education. Three primary themes were identified through this study: lessons for the social worker, lessons for social work programs, and robust career experiences.

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Most entering the social work field do so with a mindset of serving people or improving society at large through their work. Social workers are educated with the knowledge and understanding that people's lives are impacted at many levels: *micro*, or the individual or interpersonal relationships; *mezzo*, at the community, local, or state level; and *macro*, or the broader society or political landscape (Miley, O'Melia, Dubois, 2013). Social workers are steeped in Bronfenbrenner's bio-psycho-social framework which takes into account the whole system of an individual: the person, place, context, and time (Miley, O'Melia, Dubois, 2013). Social work is often found described as a multi-disciplinary worldview which combines the fields of sociology, psychology, policy, and civic engagement. The field offers many ways this may be fulfilled, including direct practice, administrative, or advocacy-related jobs.

Despite a long tradition of social reform serving as a foundation of social work, some in the field assert that this aspect of the work is diminishing at an alarming pace, with an increased emphasis on the professionalization of the profession and focusing on direct practice furthering a long-standing and historic source of tension within the profession. Meanwhile, there has been an increased interest in learning how the profession can be more effective at the policy level. Current research includes a look at the effectiveness of interest groups at the state and federal level through the eyes of National Association of Social Workers (NASW) directors, social workers elected to office, and social workers themselves. Existing research also has been conducted regarding social work education program requirements for policy education. While a number of topics are addressed that approach the issue of how social workers are engaging in policy and advocacy, the research is very limited in terms of depth.

This study addressed how social workers are involved in social policy and explored their experiences to find lessons that may be learned for the profession and adds to a very limited knowledge base on the subject. This research seeks to answer: What are the lessons that social workers can learn from those in macro roles who have successfully influenced state policies that affect micro social work? What differences and similarities exist between the differing role orientations' perspectives?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Social Work's Historic Focus on Social Reform**

Social work's rich history of civic engagement and social reform can be traced to three primary sources: (1) a substantial and lengthy history of social activism; (2) professional mandates, and; (3) the profession's scholarly writing (Abramovitz, 1998).

**History of activism.** The social work profession has included a focus on social change since its earliest days, with Jane Addams at its forefront. Jane Addams is celebrated in the social work profession as one of its beloved founders, based on the creation of settlement houses, living centers with programming for recent immigrants to assist in creating community and assimilation, in the Chicago area and beyond (Abramovitz, 1998; Miley, et al., 2011; Johnson, 2004). While the settlement house movement, or SHM, would not continue in the United States in this original form, the understanding of the environment impacting the person is forever woven into the fabric of social work.

**Professional mandates.** Regardless of where the individual social worker stands in terms of the true spirit and meaning of the profession, the profession has made itself

clear through the codification of its dedication to social change within its institutions. The National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics includes language that calls for social workers to “engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully” (NASW Code of Ethics, 2003, Sec. 6.04). Additionally, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has incorporated a policy stating that students of social work are exhorted to “engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services” (CSWE, 2008, Sec. 1.1.2). “The work of Jane Addams and others like her started in the early settlement houses became mainstream during the 1960s and found its place in the curricula of schools of social work” (Johnson, 2004).

**Scholarly writing.** The existence of macro or policy practice within the scholarly writing of the social work profession further formalizes its importance. Journals and publications such as the *Journal of Community Practice* are sources for social workers interested in social reform.

**Tension between practitioners.** There exists a long history of policy practice within the profession, and there equally exists the focus on the individual; this holistic view and inclusion of both perspectives is unique to the social work profession. However, it did not begin without struggle. The dual practices of social policy and individual casework can be traced to the origins of social work in this country, as the SHM had emerged as a counter to the Charity Organization Society, or COS, which had held its focus on individual casework. The COS and was viewed by those in the SHM as “blaming the victim” (Abramovitz, 1998; Wenocur, Reisch, 1989). “This initial conflict

between individual change and social change anticipated a century of struggle” (Abramovitz, 1998), and these dual tensions are prevalent today.

While the professional institutions of social workers have embraced both aspects of practice, others believe that social workers should identify a separation between them in the profession, identifying policy practice as an important activity but more as the individual’s duty as a citizen rather than as a professional (Abramovitz, 1998).

Much has been written about the fear of losing this macro level of focus in the field of social work throughout the course of the existence of the profession. Those concerned that the field is steadily losing its understanding and emphasis on the necessity of taking responsibility for action on the macro level. If this occurred, social work would essentially lose its ability to claim the approach of a systems perspective.

While there are clearly many ways in which to “be” a social worker, the profession itself has long been at odds over which emphasis is most important, with those in the Settlement House Movement identifying the individual as part of a larger community, and the Charity Organization Services focused solely on the individual (Wenocur, Reisch, 1989). These tensions go back as far as the profession itself and persist today; however, recent social work academic literature has identified a diminishing presence of social workers contributing to the profession through anything but direct practice.

### **Concern Over the Future of Social Advocacy**

Many scholars spanning the past several decades have been called to send up warning flares to the profession of the diminishing active inclusion of policy practice in social work practice. “...(S)ocial work has been more concerned with the enhancement of

the profession and less concerned with the issues of racism, sexism, poverty, and access to health care” (Haynes, Mickelson, 2006).

Johnson (2004) goes on to articulate that the social work profession has moved from being leaders in community practice to serving in secondary roles, essentially having handed over these responsibilities to organizations or governmental bodies which do not necessarily have the same principles and ethics of social work: “...we are not at the table (or barely at the table) as these new articulations of community practice are forming.” She goes on to suggest that those in the social work profession take more proactive responsibility in being aware of the groups that are doing this work and sharing the information with social work colleagues, reaching out to the groups to participate in the work by attending conferences, dialoging, and networking (Johnson, 2004).

### **Barriers to Civic Engagement**

Some barriers regarding involvement by social workers in political engagement may include: a mostly passive efforts (i.e. email, newsletter) for NASW state chapters to communicate with members, the unknown level to which a member’s employer is supportive or discouraging of political activism, a hostile or less-than-friendly political climate with which to work, general apathy on the part of the individual, perceived lack of information about the issues, times constraints, and, finally, confusion around the laws regarding political involvement for nonprofit organizations (Hartnett, Harding, Scanlon, 2005; Rocha, Poe, Thomas, 2010). The NASW chapter Executive Directors who responded to the study survey also estimated that their membership comprised just 32% of market share for members, which leaves a great deal of potential membership and

resources untouched and unincorporated into the profession's primary means for political organizing (Hartnett, Harding, Scanlon, 2005).

**Confusion.** Social workers have long been established in policy practice, fulfilling the goals of the profession through the varied roles of both macro and direct practice. However, for some who are newer to the field, or for those who practice solely at the direct-practice level, the inclusion of policy and activism in their social work curriculum may not be obvious or intuitive. Practitioners may not always see a connection between politics and the clients or populations with which they work. Opportunities to clear that confusion exist, however; Haynes and Mickelson (2006) identified in their research the assumption that the majority of social workers enter the field from the perspective of having seen or experienced "injustice and wanted to right it."

No matter the social worker's primary role, it is a worthy goal to increase participation in policy practice. Therefore, it is important to know why social workers already participate, and what may deter or prevent those who are not.

Perhaps the most well-known national organization that provides opportunities and encouragement for social workers to participate in the advocacy process is the National Association of Social Workers, or the NASW. While it is not known for certain how politically active NASW state chapters are, research conducted by Hartnett, Harding, and Scanlon (2005) indicated that 22 state chapters provided strong evidence that they are making concerted efforts in making politics a meaningful component of their work.

**Employer lack of support.** Despite potential positive outcomes for clients and agencies, employers themselves may hold confusion or discomfort around employee

participation in social policy and advocacy efforts, and therefore may discourage them from civic engagement activities or promotion. Moreover, social work is most often accomplished through entities that are controlled by established power groups, which may constrict the social workers' change agenda, if considered to be out of the bounds of current mainstream culture (Haynes & Mickelson, 2006).

**Conflicting professional role orientation.** "Students often express the mistaken belief that it is unethical for social workers to be involved in politics" (Harris Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). This confusion further underscores the need for the inclusion of social policy within the education of the profession. "Role conflict is a fact of modern occupational life. It seems to be especially prevalent among professional workers in formal organizations" (Billingsley, 1964). The literature has parsed out various social worker identities and how those identities may impact that social worker's view towards social activism as an integral part of their position (Billingsley, 1964; Cherry Reeser, 1992). The research has uncovered three primary role orientation categories that social workers fall under: bureaucratic, client, and professional, discussed in further detail below. (Cherry Reeser, 1992).

### **Supporting Factors for Social Worker Engagement**

Citing Bucher and Strauss (1964), Cherrey Reeser (1994) finds continued evidence that the social work profession remains a "segmented" and "not unified" profession, as evidenced by an empirical study of social worker role orientation. "Role orientation, or the primary identity the social worker claims, has an impact upon that social worker's willingness and comfort in participating in advocacy and activism (Billingsley, 1964; Cherrey Reeser, 1994). Three primary categories of role orientations

have been identified, along with their propensity for engaging in social activism:

*professional orientation*, or those that identify a primary focus upon the profession (i.e. licensure), the population served, or the employer; *bureaucratic orientation*, or those professionals focused most on their career movement and who pay particular attention to agency hierarchy and foremost adherence to agency policy; and those who claim a *client orientation* as their primary professional focus (Cherrey Reeser, 1994). Research shows the professional orientation is neither indicative or restrictive of social activism, bureaucratic role orientation is the most likely to eschew participation in activism, and social workers with a client orientation are the most likely of the three to engage in activism (Cherrey Reeser, 1994). However, the most engaged role orientation is those with both a professionalism and client-centered orientation, they are the most likely to participate in activism (Cherrey Reeser, 1994). This may be due to the NASW's continued commitment to engagement in political action; when the profession's foremost professional organization shows meaningful commitment over a sustained period of time, the effect may be normalization and therefore identifying activism as an integral part of the profession (Cherrey Reeser, 1994).

The question of whether or not social workers are actually taking actions in the political arena is one that has been posited in the social work arena a limited number of times in the past several decades. Perhaps the question is not whether the work is happening, but instead, is the work that is happening effective? First posited by Wolk (1981), who pointed out that the question is not whether social workers are involved, because the evidence is that they are as involved as "can be expected," or at the same rate as other professional sectors, and at a rate higher than the general public (Ritter, 2007).

The question is: are they acting effectively, and do they have the skills to do so? As Wolk (1981) stated, “(d)espite well-known instances of political activity, the social work literature is generally critical of the minimal involvement of social work as a profession and social workers as individuals in the legislative process.” As the politics continued in the decade following the Wolk study, the NASW saw the need to increase its political activity, and thus the political activity of its state chapters followed (Salcido, Tramel Seck, 1992). Research into the ways NASW and its members are most actively involved in politics included writing letters to elected officials, phoning elected officials, and lobbying, followed by participating in interest group coalitions; activities that were less likely to see involvement by social workers included attending protests, participating in voter registration drives; some chapters were very active in campaign work while others were not at all active; the activities where no activity was reported were fundraising and attending hearings (Salcido & Tramel Seck, 1992; Harris Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). It may be the case that social workers are focusing their attentions on political activities that are limited in their ability to have an impact on actual policy outcomes, as “(s)ocial workers are least active in contributing financially to campaigns, serving on a community board or council, testifying at a legislative hearing, or attending political meetings or rallies, and volunteering to work on a political campaign” (Ritter, 2007).

Activism tends to increase among older social workers, those with their doctorate, and those who have served in the profession longer (Wolk, 1981; Harris Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). Although earlier research indicated otherwise, more recent research also shows that a majority of social workers report that their social work education linked

advocacy and practice (Harris Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010); however, the breadth and depth of the education continues to be unknown (Lane, 2011; Rothman, 2013).

### **Social Worker Roles in Policy Practice**

Social workers often utilize their social work education to become community organizers, administrators, caseworkers, or mental health therapists, each reflective of the differing levels and interpretations of the profession. Additionally, some may even seek and be elected to public office. In many ways, the role of the social worker, at any level of service, is like that of an elected official. The elected official is obligated to serve those who elected them as a representative. The clear difference between the two is that the social worker is mandated by the National Association of Social Work's *Code of Ethics* (NASW "Code of Ethics," n.d.) to work for those who are underrepresented and underserved, while the legislator is expected to be looking out for the majority of those they represent in their home district.

**Advocates.** Social workers may be engaged in advocacy as individuals, through interest groups, or as members through professional associations. Advocacy may include testifying during a legislative hearing, writing letters to the editor, calling legislators to encourage a stance on a policy, and other activities. Clients may also be engaged through this process. Examples of advocacy may include testifying at a committee hearing or participating in a grassroots lobby day.

**Interest groups and coalitions.** Involvement by individuals in organizations or coalitions comprised of organizations that seek to impact policy outcomes (Hoefler, 2001). Interest groups may include social service agencies, labor unions, or professional organizations. When organizing support for a specific issue that a decision-making body

will address, interest groups often will unite to form issue-focused coalitions. These coalitions are often temporary, in place only for the duration in which the specific policy is being addressed, but others may exist longer-term, depending on the goals of the coalition members.

**Legislative and campaign staff.** Social workers may be found working in the national or state capitols or on campaigns, to elect candidates they support. While tracking the number of legislative and campaign staff who have a social work education is difficult, the NASW in 2010 provided an estimate that 37 known social workers were employed in Congress at that time (Lane, 2011).

**Elected officials.** “Social workers running for or elected to political office often find that their social work training has a variety of uses within the political arena” (Lane, 2011). The following quote by Maryann Mahaffey perhaps best encapsulates how well suited the social worker is to serving the public in this important way:

A social worker brings to the political process something that’s unique, that no one else has. Anyone else can learn how to play games, you know power games. Anybody else can learn how to negotiate. Anybody can learn how to do the power manipulations. Those are techniques and skills that can be learned fairly easy. What the social worker brings is a value system that, if implemented, along with the skills, makes the difference. (Haynes & Mickelson, 2008).

Additionally, NASW encourages its members to run for office (“Why Social Workers Should Run for Office, n.d.) with the following language:

Social workers make good political candidates because they:

- are well educated

- are articulate and experienced in public speaking
- are comfortable at persuasion
- are knowledgeable about their communities
- understand social problems and are committed to social justice
- understand how policies affect individuals and communities

Social workers run for public office because they:

- are attracted to politics through an issue or cause
- realize they are just as capable as many officeholders
- see the opportunity to make changes on a broader scale
- want to provide leadership to improve their community

Furthermore:

NASW also encourages social workers to offer their professional expertise to campaigns. Social workers can use their skills as campaign managers, volunteer coordinators, and political directors. These jobs can also translate into legislative jobs in which social workers can shape policy, and help constituents by working with federal, state and local agencies to get individuals appropriate assistance.

Social workers can also translate their involvement in campaigns into key appointments in state and local agencies in which they can oversee key government agencies to influence the practice of social work and seek social justice.

**Civic engagement of clients.** For social workers working with individual clients, there may be missed opportunities by avoiding client engagement in civic engagement.

Elmoore-Jackson (2005) points out that state legislators, when seeking information on an

issue, turn first to their constituents and to advocacy groups they have already established a relationship with and trust, and therefore it is important to incorporate client voices in social activism. However, the number of social workers or their employers who make it a practice to ask clients to participate in this manner is not high (Harris Rome & Hoehstetter; Wolf-Branigan, 2010). The activities engaged in most frequently included voter registration or get-out-the-vote efforts, with most social workers reporting they have “never” encouraged a client to take political action (Harris Rome & Hoehstetter; Wolf-Branigan, 2010).

### **Effective Advocacy for Impacting Social Policy**

For social workers participating in the profession through social reform and advocacy, it is necessary to know how to do the work effectively. The literature is focused on human interest groups, not the individual social worker; it provides insight into what tactics may be the most useful for organizations seeking to expand their influence in advocacy.

**Human interest groups.** Hoefer’s (2001) research of federal interest groups has indicated seven traits for highly effective (those able to achieve policy goals) social interest groups: among those reporting “highly effective” status, the tactics used went beyond the traditional forms of political engagement such as lobbying to explore avenues such as legal action in the courts, developed relationships with and built consensus among experts, aided Congress and government agencies in policy creation, had a proactive media presence, and engaged actively in political campaigns. Hoefer (2005) went on to research these traits in several states to assess similarities and differences, finding that while there are some shared traits of effectiveness both between the national

and the state level, and also between different states, he cautioned that states must be assessed individually given their varying political climates and governance structures. A similar study of Ohio lawmakers (Teater, 2009) echoed this model of effectiveness at the state level, but with a stronger emphasis on activist or member involvement.

**NASW members.** Additional research has identified NASW members reporting a higher interest level in national politics (Hartnett, Harding, & Scanlon, 2005). However, it is increasingly the case that the decisions that most profoundly impact human services programs and social policy are actually made at the state level (Hoefer, 2005; Teater, 2009). “Increased attention to research to support interest group effectiveness in altering state policy is imperative” (Hoefer, 2005).

**State legislators.** State legislators were asked to cite their most valued sources of information and named the establishment of relationships as key; either with an individual constituent, or with an advocacy group (Jackson-Elmoore, 2005). These legislators indicated that advocacy groups that host conferences or other meetings and who invited legislators were effective in fostering the connections with service providers, advocacy groups, and experts that the legislators stated they valued (Jackson-Elmoore, C., 2005).

### **Research Questions**

With a long history of civic engagement in the social work profession, the questions have turned to learning what is most effective. This research takes into account the need for participation and for advocacy in social work based upon the experiences of those who are actively doing the work as a means to inform future effective efforts. Previous studies have looked at this question from the role orientation of the social

worker as elected official, as NASW executive directors, and other roles within human interest groups. This study will look at the question through a variety of these lenses to identify what has been the most successful work done at the state level: What are the lessons that social workers can learn from those in macro roles who have successfully influenced state policies that affect micro social work? What differences and similarities exist between the differing role orientations' perspectives?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical lenses used for approaching this research included empowerment theory, with additional influence by the researcher's professional experience of more than a decade working at the policy level in state and national electoral politics and for advocacy groups. "Empowerment theory seeks to increase the personal, interpersonal and political power of oppressed and marginalized populations for individual and collective transformation" (Lee, 2001).

These frameworks, combined with an on-going personal exploration of self-actualization through the methods of yoga study and meditation, have led to the development of an understanding of the individual and their surroundings as being interconnected and constantly influencing each other. Ultimately, that regardless of preference over direct practice working with individuals versus working to pass policy or elect supportive candidates, it would be irresponsible to dismiss either and thus to ignore the whole. Restated, the approach used in this study may be the reverse of the following: "...social work scholarship suggests that, although a focus on individual is critically important, it may not be enough" (Abramovitz, 1998).

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the differences and similarities of the personal experiences of those with a higher education (having obtained a bachelors or masters degree) background in social work and have successfully participated in the passage and/or implementation of proactive social policy that will affect individuals at the micro level. This study was exploratory and qualitative, and used semi-structure open-ended questions as a means to discover the unique perspectives of the individuals (Monette, Sullivan, DeJong, 2011). Qualitative research indicates that the data is shown through words, descriptions, and narratives, rather than “numbers and counts” found in quantitative research (Monette, et al, 2011). The data will then be analyzed using grounded theory, which provides a focus on the language of the respondents and identifies recurring language and themes (Padgett, 2013).

### **Sample**

The study consisted of eight respondents (n= 8) with a higher education degree in social work and who have taken part in passing or implementing social policy in some capacity. The participants were purposively recruited based upon their education, their experience, and a variety of roles including elected official, advocate, lobbyist, agency administrator, or committee witness (Padgett, 2008).

A variety of recruitment strategies was used for the recruitment of subjects, including purposive and convenient sampling, and snowballing. This researcher had previous professional experience working in public policy, and sent an e-mail (Appendix A) to already-established acquaintances who agreed to share with their personal contacts.

From this point, the researcher utilized a snowball strategy of recruitment (Monette, et al, 2011). Potential participants were requested to make direct contact with the researcher upon interest in the study, made aware that there were no benefits to participation, and upon agreement of a time and location for the interview were sent the informed consent form (Appendix B) and interview questions (Appendix C) electronically.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Potential participants were asked to contact the researcher directly to receive information about the study and to learn about participation. They were informed that there were no direct benefits or incentives to participation in this study. Respondents were also informed in advance that each interview would be recorded, would last for approximately one hour, and would be conducted in a place that both interviewer and interviewee deemed sufficiently private and suitable for an interview. The interviews were recorded using the researcher's Sony recording device, and the researcher was the sole transcriber. Specific quotes or language shared by the participant and used in this research presentation and paper are public, and all identifying information has been removed. Participants were provided an informed consent form and interview questions in advance of the interview that were previously assessed and approved St. Catherine University's Institutional Review Board. Each respondent was required to sign the consent form, which is stored in the researcher's home in a locked cabinet. After the interview process, confidentiality of each participant will be maintained by use of a password-encrypted storage space on the cloud of the interview recordings and the process of de-identifying data on transcripts and the shredding of paper notes. All

documents, digital or hard copy, pertaining to the interview will be destroyed in entirety by June 1, 2016.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews consisted of questions that were reviewed and pre-approved by the researcher's committee chair and two members. The questions were focused on the respondent's experiences in the process of the passage of social policy. The questions began with the exploration of the respondent's career and background, and then moved into the specifics of their role in the passage of social policy, and their personal opinions about that experience. The questions were semi-structured and open ended, which allowed the researcher to expand as deemed necessary so that the respondent may share information most important to them (Monette, et al., 2011). Data were collected in qualitative interviews that took place in person or at the respondent's office or coffee shop, or over the phone.

The interview questions were formulated after a review of the literature and were constructed based on prior research questions. The questions focused on the topic of the participant's experiences in social work policy implementation through the lens of their social work education. Interviews lasted about 45 to 60 minutes each.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using grounded theory and incident coding. Transcripts of each interview were read line by line and then analyzed for codes and themes based on words, phrases, or concepts that appear frequently in relation to the research question (Monette, et al., 2011). Interview memos were also drafted to further familiarize the researcher with the data. The researcher then determined prevalent codes and themes

based upon the language of the respondents. Once the initial coding of the transcripts occurred, a second review was conducted by the researcher to ensure reliability (Monette et. al., 2011, p. 119).

### **Findings**

What are the lessons that social workers can learn from those in macro roles who have successfully influenced state policies that affect micro social work? What differences and similarities exist between the differing role orientations' perspectives?

The focus of this research was to explore the lessons that social workers can learn from others in the profession who have engaged in policy practice and who have successfully influenced state policies that affect direct practice social work, including the differences and similarities of the experiences as compared to differing roles. The current study had the following interview questions: (a) What has been the participants' career path, and how has their social work identity evolved; (b) What is one successful policy they would like to describe, and who did the policy impact; (c) What was the respondents' role in this issue, and how did they come to be involved; (d) Who were the stakeholders, allies, and opponents, and how did they help or hinder the policy; (f) How was opposition overcome; (g) Was there grassroots organizing involved in this effort; (h) What, if any, are the next steps involved in this policy; (i) Are there factors that would have made its passage or implementation easier; (j) Why did the respondent choose to share this particular policy; (k) What is the respondents' view regarding the level of social worker engagement in the policy process; (l) And finally, what can the respondent recall of their own social worker education and policy practice requirements, and how

might their opinions of those requirements have changed, if at all? How did their social worker education impact their experience on the policy issue discussed?

The hope of this study is to add to the limited literature that exists regarding social workers who are participating in public policy to better understand their experiences, specifically around a successful policy example. The method used for recruiting participants used purposive and snowball sampling; the researcher sent recruitment emails to social work professors and instructors, as well as previously established personal acquaintances who then shared the email with their personal networks. Nine potential participants responded to the researcher, with eight who were able to schedule interviews, agreeing to a 45 minute to one-hour interview. Interview questions and informed consent form were emailed to the participant in advance of the interview.

The sample included eight participants (N = 8); four who identified as female and four as male. Four preferred she/her/hers pronouns, three for he/him/his, and one participant who preferred not to answer. Of these, seven identified as white/Caucasian/European American, and one as African American. Males are overrepresented in the sample as compared to the population, which is approximately 83.8%, but the racial or ethnic breakdown is comparable (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The participants shared their age and number of years practicing social work; the average age of respondents was 38.6 years old and respondents had an average 13 years of social work practice. One participant had a BSW and seven had a MSW. Of the MSWs, three claimed dual degrees (JD, MBA, and MPP). Four of the participants carry no licensures, while two are LGSWs, one LISW, and one LICSW. Five participants cited no professional memberships, while one each of the following were named: NASW,

Society for Social Work Research, and Association of Macro Practice Social Workers. Demographics of the participants can be seen in Table 1.

Participants shared their social work educational focus, with a majority citing a “macro,” or “program evaluation and public policy” program tracks. Two of the respondents attended clinically focused MSW programs. Additionally, six respondents mentioned their undergraduate degrees, three of whom studied something other than social work. Respondents’ were also asked to summarize their career paths, and the researcher has included their employer setting within the context of the policy shared in the chart below (Table 1). Five respondents worked in a government setting, with three of those at the state legislature and two at a state agency. Three respondents were operating within a nonprofit or agency setting. Respondents tended to use the terms “macro,” “community practice,” “policy,” and “advocacy” interchangeably, which is reflected in these findings.

Data were gathered through transcribed audio-recorded interviews. Themes were discovered using both inductive and deductive methods. The transcripts were read through twice in an inductive manner, allowing themes to develop on their own through coding. The researcher then created memos for each interview. Data were further explored in a deductive manner to determine actual themes found supporting the inductive coding and theme emergence.

**Table 1***Demographics*

Characteristic	Response (n= 8)
Race/Ethnicity	
African American	1
White	7
Sex	
Female	4
Male	4
MSW Track	
Clinical	2
Macro/Community Practice	5
BSW only	1
Licensure	
LGSW	2
LISW	1
LICSW	1
None	4

Three primary themes emerged during the study: lessons for the social worker or the social work student; lessons for social work programs and curriculum decision-makers seeking to increase social work students' interest in policy practice; and a final theme which offered insight into the various roles of the respondents and how they relate.

The first theme of lessons for the social worker and social work student elicited several subthemes, including their social policy success examples; references to policies and advocacy that took a great deal of time to come to fruition; factors for success; and populations that were involved or impacted by this social policy.

The second theme of lessons for social work programs included the subthemes of social workers who make connections between the issues that the individual faces and their root causes; identification of personal values and motivations for participation in macro social work; perspectives of the social worker regarding their education experiences and policy practice requirements; how the social worker viewed their education influence on their career; comparisons made of social work to other related disciplines; sources of inspiration the social worker received along their social work career path; and finally, where the social worker initially became aware of the policy they selected to share during the interview.

The final theme regarding social worker role orientations and career perspectives brought to light additional subthemes centered around the respondents' broad career duties and responsibilities; their perspectives regarding social worker participation in advocacy; respondents' input of how the profession is misguided by others in the work place; the ethical tension of social work and politics; social workers' vast career experience, with their involvement in many different social issues.

The findings indicate that social workers who tend to do the work of social policy see this as part of the complete or inherent identity of a social worker. A majority of respondents listed several jobs, tasks, and issues throughout their careers which incorporated a breadth and depth of social worker-related skills. Most social workers made reference to an outside source of inspiration or encouragement on their career path. Additionally, the workers frequently made connections: between potential mutual acquaintances, references to elected officials or prominent activists, and other potential resources for the researcher.

### **Lessons for the Social Worker and Social Work Student**

**Social policy successes.** Each social worker was asked to identify and share an example of a successful social policy in which they had an active role. These policy successes took place at the state legislature and in state agencies. Several participants discussed power in the work of social policy. References to the length of time necessary pass policy were made repeatedly.

***State legislation.*** Five of the examples of successful social policy shared by respondents were grounded primarily in the state legislative process, thus required passage by both the house of representatives and the senate, and were signed into law by the governor.

***State agency implementation.*** Three examples of successful social policy shared included the involvement of state agencies. One policy was focused on rewriting rules and regulations for a specific program; one was a policy that had an impact over the actual operation of the state agency as well as how the programs were assessed and

implemented; and the last was the implementation of a federal law, which had both legislative and state agency components.

**Policy takes a long time.** Respondents frequently referenced the amount of time taken to bring a bill to fruition. The two participants who had worked in state agencies pointed to frustration with the change in administrations and how elections impact the work that they are able to accomplish, citing a shift in priorities that comes in with a new governor or commissioner. One respondent shared that change can also be blocked interdepartmentally, with resistance from co-workers who are accustomed to a particular manner of operation or who have a focus that does not maximize collaboration.

**Factors for success.** Participants were asked to cite reasons for selecting the specific policy they shared. Most respondents stated they chose the particular policy success because of its simplicity to explain; some cited the amount of time it took to get the policy implemented, the fact that the policy garnered bipartisan support, and that the respondent considered their policy success a “unique” story or situation. One respondent felt their example was "a good lesson in seeing how social work can really be applied” to social policy; another shared their example because it was the “biggest achievement in my life so far.”

***Grassroots engagement.***

We realized that if you are going to convince two hundred and one legislators or at least a majority of them- 134 in the house and 67 in the senate- if you are going to do that, you are going to have to do it through their constituents.

Half the respondents indicated a grassroots engagement effort was involved in the policy they shared. Many respondents referenced the importance of creating coalitions to

build their power, “I think it strengthens us to be a part of coalitions.” Grassroots lobbying tactics including phone calls, letters, and emails to legislators, citizen testimony in legislative committees, “postcards to the Governor,” and media campaigns such as letters to the editor and op-eds in local and state news services were also cited as critical to success. Although grassroots efforts were only cited in half the stories, those answering in the negative to this question indicated that efforts may have taken place, but they personally were not directly involved, or that that work had happened earlier in the process, as in the case of policy implementation at the state agency level.

**Populations impacted.** All eight of the respondents indicated that the policy had the largest impact for vulnerable or disenfranchised populations. Some addressed issues of immediate crisis and the legislation was enacted immediately; most others were public health, safety, or quality-of-life related. One impacted the social work profession, with the case strongly made that the policy had a direct impact over the quality of services delivered.

**Stakeholders and allies.** The question, “Who were the key stakeholders and allies in the issue and what did they do that helped or hindered?” was posed to each respondent. With each policy shared covering substantially different issues and populations, most indicated the stakeholders were the populations impacted, coalition groups, and advocates working on the issue, as well as elected officials.

**Helped success.** One respondent shared that the broad geographical implications of the population helped the passage of the policy, as it ensured bipartisan support. Two respondents made reference to the importance of elected official “champions” in moving their social policies, differentiating them from supporters in their higher level of support

and involvement. Most participants referred to their attention to relationships with key stakeholders as helpful to their efforts. Several also shared that grassroots organizing and the “humanizing,” or “putting a face” to the issue by sharing real life stories of those impacted was critical to success, and one respondent directly stated that the social worker is best suited to identifying and engaging individuals who are impacted. Lastly, one cited the ability to fundraise enough resources to hire a professional lobbyist and a grassroots organizer as paramount to their efforts.

*Hindered success.* Unsurprisingly, factors which hindered or held up the success of the social policy at some point during the process included bipartisanship, ideological disagreements, and territorial disputes between groups or supporters who might typically be viewed as “allies,” but at some point were pitted against one another as they disputed resources.

*Opposition.* Respondents were asked to further expand on policy obstacles by identifying those in opposition. As many as half cited no opposition, aside from the obstacles of working through issues with like-minded allies forced to compete for the same resources or otherwise impacted by the policy. Just one respondent cited partisanship obstacles as opposition. All who cited opposition indicated that it was overcome by building and leveraging relationships in some way; grassroots engagement, being “intentional” about conversations, and a willingness to be flexible or compromise over the policy.

### **Lessons for Social Work Programs**

**Systemic connections.** Most respondents addressed their motivation to be a social worker doing social policy. Nearly every respondent identified the connection between

how the individual is impacted by broader social policy, a few referencing “root causes” and systemic issues as primary drivers of their career path. Several went on to describe the integration of their values by doing social work on the policy or advocacy level. Further, many made note of social work at the social policy level as part of their values, their personal experiences, or simply that they made a choice for a specific job due to practical considerations.

**Broader impact.** Most respondents made a direct acknowledgement or reference to a moment they realized a systemic link to problems that individuals were experiencing in society. One social worker stated, “You see the same issues over and over and over again, doing casework, and I really wanted to look at the root of policy and how policy affects low income communities or disenfranchised communities.”

Another respondent shared, “I became increasingly aware of the structure of the city and unemployment and the education system that led to this, you know, very specific problem in very specific areas.”

Respondents cited being “drawn” to or “called to” doing work at the policy level once this link became clear in their career evolution.

**Equal importance of micro and macro practice.** Three participants emphasized a need for both direct practice and advocacy as essential components to the whole of social work. One respondent shared that in her current role as an academic, she continues to hold a part time position in direct practice “so that I can concretely see the lives of human beings.” Another shared a related concern of how “the capitol... feels like [a] very disconnected place from the experiences of like people who are living in poverty, or people of color, or any groups besides like the very dominant groups in our society.... So

that sort of tension is what moved me in the direction of doing the dual degree [with Master of Public Policy] program.” This respondent shared of their decision-making process of where to focus energy:

Really bouncing back and forth between like really wanting to work individually with people and feel like that connection and that like real life... connection with people who are struggling and like be in the struggle with people... And also feeling like that's not how real change happens. That we will continue to have the same problems unless we really change policies.

Yet another respondent shared:

We shouldn't talk about micro and macro practice as two separate things. It is the same thing, that the issues that you deal with on a day to day basis with your clients are all steeped in policy and systems that are contributing to these people's homelessness and mental health and chemical health issues and all these kind of things that you deal with.

### **Personal values and motivations.**

***Family influence.*** One respondent shared how they “come from a long line of social workers,” listing several family members and their roles, “although they are in direct practice.”

***Personally rewarded by the work.*** Some respondents explicitly stated how they found social policy and advocacy work personally fulfilling. “I loved that work, it was really rewarding... I felt that it was a good combination of my social justice and interests in politics.”

**Power.** Power was referenced several times throughout the interviews, with respondents sharing how they felt they were in a position of power with regard to shaping or promoting policy in a way that could be helpful to people. Three respondents expressed the opinion that the “real” power lies not in the legislative process, but instead in the creation and implementation of rules and regulations. “...I was able to infiltrate some language to make it more progressive than your average...” statute. Those who worked at the legislature cited their own power, “I think you have a lot of power when you are writing these summaries for members...”

...and that’s something like when I go and talk to student groups, like you know the real sexy thing that everyone focuses on is what bill is being debated and going to the legislature blah blah blah, but legislators are- legislators can pass laws but they are constitutionally barred from implementing the laws and you know all they are doing are putting words on a page and that’s far, that’s a long ways away from what those words will actually mean to people’s lives on the ground and so there’s a lot of work to actually implement those laws and working with agencies and counties and cities and whomever else to sort of implement these things to make sure that they are implemented in a way that you like would be most beneficial to the folks that you are advocating for...

**Personal character traits.** Throughout the interviews, several respondents referenced their own personal character traits as providing important context to their social work identity.

**Innate curiosity.** One respondent shared their “innate curiosity” of “what makes people tick... also how did they end up ticking like that?” This respondent indicated that

these questions informed their world-view and had its origins in their childhood experiences.

*Action-oriented.* One participant made reference to their action-oriented identity a number of times throughout the interview. “I like to get shit done,” and, “...I’m not necessarily a do-er, I’m now a teacher and a researcher, and an academic. But through all of that I still maintain my base identity as a social worker, as an action-oriented person.”

*Idealist.* In speaking of their career path, one participant directly referenced an idealist world-view as a personal motivator, stating, “As you can probably sense, I’m very much an idealist.”

*Social workers as connectors.* Several participants made suggestions during the interview for additional social workers for the researcher to connect with, or referenced issues, campaigns, legislation, labor unions, potential mutual friends or acquaintances, or suggestions of social work organizations to join. One participant also mentioned encouraging their non-social worker coworkers who had expressed an interest in going to graduate school to consider social work, “They aren’t buying it but I have time,” they said.

*Driven by personal values.* Many respondents directly referenced their values as they shared their story of career and social work identity evolution.

*Connecting partisan politics with social work.*

I still call myself a social worker, even though I’m not licensed or working one-on-one with people. Basically everything that is a part of me in being a DFL-er and wanting to help people- even as being a Christian- still fits in very nicely with being a social worker...

*Rejection of partisan politics.* Many recipients shared the sentiment that partisan politics was not enough to stay motivated in doing policy work, and thus having a social work lens was essential. “I’m not a huge political person in the sense I don’t like the ‘game’ stuff, I don’t really find that to be energizing. I like working on things where it’s kind of bigger than politics.”

Additionally, several respondents described their jobs as “essentially” non-or bi-partisan.

*Rejection of direct-services practice.* A few participants cited not only feeling called more to policy and advocacy, but also a realization that direct practice was not a good fit for them.

So I was all macro and like the summer classes were all like ‘Kids Who Sexually Abuse Other Kids,’ and I was just like, freaking out the whole time. And everyone’s like, ‘Oh you know this is really interesting,’ and I was like, ‘Nooooooooo!’

*Personal or practical factors.* A few social workers referenced personal and practical reasons for choosing a particular job at a particular moment in time based on factors such as the location of the office, their financial situation, and parenting young children.

*Distance.* Two respondents shared that the distance from home to work had an impact on either staying at a specific job or with seeking and accepting a position.

*Finances.* One respondent shared that they were not solely motivated by the pay related to a specific job offer, but did cite it as one positive aspect of accepting the position.

*Children.* Two participants referenced having children as having an impact on their work lives; one who worked part time until their child was in school, and another who cited taking a break from social policy work and instead focusing on a consulting career while raising young children at home.

*Recipient of social services.* One cited the experience of being a recipient of social services as critical to informing their perspective as they moved through their career.

**Education experiences and perspectives.** Questions about the social workers' education focused on their recollection of policy practice requirements, how they thought of them at the time, and how those thoughts have evolved since. The participants were also asked how they would describe their social work education's impact on the social policy issue shared. Additionally, respondents offered reflections of their social work education experience. Several social workers expressed regrets and critiques of their education, and others emphasized social work skills and learning as directly transferrable and critical to advocacy work. Still others remarked upon the misperceptions they have encountered in the workplace around the identity of a social worker, and one respondent made reference to the tension they have experienced doing advocacy as a social worker bound by the Code of Ethics.

**Policy practice requirements.** Answers to this segment of the interview were linked to the individual's level or focus of social work education. For example, respondents with a BSW, and those with a MSW focused on clinical practice, cited one required course that covered "the gamut" and "included all the things that happen on the macro level." Those who had attended programs with a focus on community practice or

public policy shared varied opinions of their curriculum, and just one respondent could not remember any required class.

***Positive Feedback.*** One respondent shared that their one required policy practice class was the impetus for the direction of their career in social policy and advocacy, with several others stating that they believe there should be more policy practice requirements in social work education. Regarding the numerous policy classes taken during her MSW, one respondent reflected,

I think they need to give social work programs more credit for that, because you know, a lot of people get their master in public policy or public health and then they, you know, it's something that maybe social workers need to be better at explaining that they have this background and this education in that type of work.

***Negative Feedback.*** More than half of the social workers indicated a negative recollection of their required class. One respondent shared that, at the time, they did not see the connection between clinical education and policy practice. Another shared that they did not recall the class as being “super engaging or valuable.” Two respondents shared that they felt they learned more from doing the work, referencing either their field practicum experience or their jobs post-graduation as being more practical, saying, “So much of it you just have to learn by doing.”

I feel like my degrees are... more like benefit me on paper than necessarily like the first work internship experience is, like I feel like what has shaped me more than like my MSW education, just to be really frank with you.

Both these social workers referenced being uncertain of the benefits of their education beyond simply having the degree, with one posing the question: “How much I

actually got out of my program? I'm still not completely sure." Further, this respondent cited a challenge to "sell" their social work degree in the setting of political advocacy work, sharing an instance of an organization not being "used to hiring social workers for anything, so that, you know, I think being really deliberate about how do I really talk about social work skills in this sort of transferable way."

Three respondents went on to question whether or not they might have more positively benefitted having sought another masters program such as public policy, law, or an MBA.

***Regrets.*** Several respondents shared regrets as they reflected on their social work education experience.

***More clinical education.*** Three respondents citing their regrets for not having a strong clinical practice background, one stating they felt it was "a huge mistake," and another referenced the clinical practice education as being helpful particularly for taking the licensure exam. Two participants indicated that they regretted not immediately seeking licensure post-graduate school, stating that they felt it ultimately lent credibility to the policy work, which corroborated what another respondent had stated about her own experience first as a clinical practice social worker and then as a social worker involved in creating and implementing social policy.

***More community practice education.*** One respondent who had participated in a clinical program indicated a desire for additional focus in classes and field education options for macro-oriented work.

***More administrative education.*** One respondent remarked that they wished they had taken more administration and management-focused social work courses.

**Influence of education on respondents' career.** Respondents were also asked to share their thoughts regarding how their social work education impacted their work in the successful social policy example shared. Participants' responses centered on how social worker skills were directly beneficial to advocacy and policy roles, with some drawing comparisons that highlighted the benefits of social work discipline over others.

**Benefits of social work skills.** Respondents universally indicated that their social work education was beneficial to the work they did in the policy and advocacy setting. One respondent praised their education, stating that the "great thing" is being able to work in such a "broad context."

*Advocacy, lobbying, and organizing.* One respondent shared, "Social work skills are very helpful, and very valuable I think for the lobbying side, and for the, you know, the organizing side and working with clients and the community..." Another social worker described the connection of social work to policy, "Because I feel like lobbying and social worker counseling aren't that different in like how to bring someone to like help people change which is like kinda what you are doing in social work, too."

*Active listening.* One social worker explained that her education "helped me digest the information and then, you know, reflect it back," "active listening," and the "process of talking things through" that "I took from my social work education was really important."

*Research.* Several respondents mentioned having conducted research in their jobs or actually worked as a researcher. Participants cited their social work research education as being a benefit, with most referencing the act of researching how other states are addressing specific issues. Stated one respondent: "I found the research side of my MSW

really helpful, post-MSW.” Another said, “...being able to really do the research and reading research, really use those statistics and data to highlight the work that you are doing and program evaluation” was a transferrable skill. A third respondent stated, “I tried to get a lot of information from you know research studies, from other states, and what their models were, and you know, try to recreate our wheel based on you know like what CMS had authorized in other places and stuff like that.”

*Grant writing.* One participant mentioned learning grant writing as part of their social work education as a benefit to their career in advocacy.

*Group work.* A few respondents directly cited group work as being a beneficial learning from their social work education that they were able to apply in their career, applying the skills to everyday meetings, program coordination, and group facilitation.

*Credibility.* While not technically a skill, credibility was frequently cited as a benefit of having a social work background. A number of respondents cited their social work identity as serving them well in terms of building relationships, being able to share their real world experiences, or their analyses of how policy issues impact people.

**Comparisons with other disciplines.** One respondent shared that while she had initially considered getting a masters degree in public policy, she felt ultimately that she had received the same education in terms of research skills, “but I felt like I’m learning it in the way that there is more soul and more depth to it.” Another shared:

Like a psychologist would have been thinking ‘What is the mental health service?’ They wouldn't have been thinking about- what are all the different systems involved in this kid’s life, and who do we want that mental health

therapist to be involving themselves with in order to appropriately treat this child.  
And what is being in foster care like?

**Sources of inspiration.** Participant field practicum experiences included work on a variety of issues, with placements at nonprofit organizations, the Federal Reserve, in a Federal Prosecutor's office, and a non-social work degree related internship with a U.S. Senator. Several subjects cited an inspirational experience as motivating them to do social work on the policy or advocacy levels.

**Field practicum.** One respondent shared that after their field practicum experience: "I realized that... what I really wanted to work on the macro level and work on the systems that help it help people through the social workers."

Another social worker stated that through her work at a nonprofit organization, she had several meetings at the capital regarding funding of social services, and "It just kept flashing at me that, you know, policy is where I need to move."

**Volunteer and service.** One participant served in the Peace Corps in a country that was once part of the Soviet Union. Their work there centered around civic engagement, which they identified as motivating to return to the United States and do more "community work."

One participant originally had planned to go into an entirely different field until she interned in U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone's office, an experience that "...that really changed the way I thought about my career, it changed the way I thought about politics, and it inspired me to do a lot more social justice work."

Another social worker was even inspired by a campaign skills-oriented training they attended, stating, "I was like, oh man, I really want to get involved in politics."

**Mentors.** Several respondents indicated that they had had outside encouragement or inspiration either to continue or to pursue their social policy path, either by professors, colleagues and peers.

A couple of the study respondents indicated being supported or inspired by a professor or a field supervisor where they found good examples of how to bring a social work perspective to policy work. “I was already interested in policy, and he made me that much more interested in it.”

**Initial issue awareness.** Respondents were asked how and when they could first recall being made aware of the issue they shared. Nearly all indicated learning about it through their job at that time, with a few indicating also that they had known of the issue at an earlier date through their undergraduate or other life experiences.

### **Role Perspectives and Career Experience**

**Respondents’ roles.** For the most part, the social workers interviewed held varied roles and responsibilities in the passage of the policy, with a direct link to where they were employed. Those working in a legislative capacity indicated that their roles centered around tracking legislation, conducting extensive research, organizing press events, creating talking points, writing press releases, analyzing the bill and amendments, writing summaries for legislative members, and becoming the “expert” on the issue. Those working in nonprofits cited their work as lobbyists or advocates, writing reports and bill analyses, organizing grassroots lobbying, managing coalition efforts, and tracking and writing legislation. At state agencies, most reported their work of researching similar efforts in other states and engaging stakeholders. Each interviewee shared a number of duties and responsibilities, more of which are cited below in Table 2.

**Table 2***Duties and Responsibilities*

Types of Duties and Responsibilities
Managed grants
Answered all questions on state rules and statutes for a region of the state
Created outpatient psychotherapy state rule
Designed and developed statutes
Convened stakeholder groups
Assist/support legislators on issues
Be an expert on legislation
Research and write bill summaries
Write press releases
Write talking points
Support the work of legislative committees and legislative members
Follow/track legislation
Tribal work
Teach in MSW program
Lobbying
Intensive diagnostic assessments
Analyst
Community organizing
Community development
Campaign volunteer
Counseling volunteer
Phone Banking
Door Knocking
Oversee policy work of the entire organization
Monitor policies that impact organizational services
Facilitate meetings
Work in coalition
Market senators
Get the word out
Try to get people involved
Pass legislation
Help DFL
Rally behind our leader
Community education
Took notes
Identify key players/opposition

**Social worker participation in policy.** Participants were asked whether they saw social workers participating or contributing to the passage or implementation of social policy. Their responses were universally positive, followed immediately by wishes for additional and more concentrated involvement. The question elicited some criticisms and much advocating for increased involvement by social workers. Respondents stressed that the skills and education of social workers makes them uniquely qualified and effective in the role of policy advocate, with one respondent stating that “social workers have the unique perspective of being able to digest information and frame it in a way that most people can understand it. Which I think is very unique to the social work profession.”

**Criticisms.** Every respondent provided a positive response regarding social worker involvement in the social policy process, and nearly every one followed up with a criticism, or plea, for more involvement and visibility of social workers.

I also think there's a general like, for most, especially more direct practice, um, social workers, like, ah [makes a disgusted face] ew, politics. Ewww! I don't like politics!... that's a real barrier to our field and to the people we are supposedly working with.

**Clinical social worker highly valued.** One of the social workers who had a strong clinical background expressed the opinion that clinical social workers were the most important social worker voices in advocacy, citing the credibility connected to their direct practice experiences. Another respondent shared the opinion that social worker involvement helps bridge the disconnect between the laws that are passed and how they would actually work in real life. “I'd like to see social workers that work in nonprofits or

direct practice have confidence in doing that advocacy work because I feel that's essential to actually being a good advocate for your client, too."

**Misguided perception of social workers.** The concept that social work skills and education are not clear to the general public or to others who do work in public policy was referenced several times during the interviews. One respondent shared that her coworkers had made remarks such as, "You aren't really a social worker because you don't do casework." This respondent stated that "people think that social workers can only be involved in policy that affects children or families," and they went on to say, "I see it as a world view and kind of perspective that I bring it... the lens for how I approach my work and how I approach my role in our community" and that they see "everything as social work."

**Ethical tension.** One respondent discussed feeling conflicted at times about asking clients to share their story publicly, as in lobbying or testifying in a legislative committee. "I kind of struggle with... it and I am very cognizant of not wanting to manipulate people." They stated that they intentionally sought to make the experiences empowering for the client.

**Broad career experience.** Participants reflected upon their career paths, which created a lengthy list of various roles that social workers may be involved. Table 3. provides a summary of these backgrounds.

**Table 3***Career Experience*

Careers
Clinical or Direct Practice Worker
Nonprofit Advocacy and Public Policy
Congressional Staff
Campaign Staff
Community Organizer
State Legislative Staff
State Agency Staff
Labor Union Staff
Community Service
Public Safety
Consultant
Teaching and Education

**Broad issue experience.** The social workers interviewed mentioned a broad array of issues that they had experience working with, outside of their selected policy experience shared, which can be found in Table 4 below.

**Table 4***Issue Experience*

Issue
Immigrants and Refugees
State Tax Policy
Medicare billing
Affordable Housing
Fair Lending Practices
Health Insurance
State Liquor Laws
Community Lending
Workforce Development
Children's Mental Health
Foster Care
Child Protection & Delinquency
Criminal Justice
Transitional Housing
Peace and Justice
Crowd-funding for small businesses
Education
Public Pensions
Collective Bargaining
Ranked Choice Voting

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to identify lessons from social workers who have worked to successfully pass or implement social policy, and to explore their differing role orientations and experiences. Since there has been a limited amount of existing research done on social workers who participate in macro level work, the results of this study are compelling in many ways. The data revealed information consistent with similar research done which had focused on just one specific type or role of social worker, such as elected official or executive director, and also revealed new, valuable information for social workers and programs currently practicing or who may be interested in practicing macro

social work. Themes included lessons for the social worker, lesson for social work programs, and robust role, career, and issue experiences that were identified. These data provide guidance for social workers and social work programs for participating and for engaging students in this work.

**Role conflict.** This research agreed with previous research that a barrier to social worker participation in advocacy may be distaste for the work, or a “role conflict” as identified by Harris Rome and Hoechstetter (2010). As participants shared their perceptions of social worker involvement, respondents indicated that some social workers were less inclined to participate at this level due to a disdain for “politics.”

**Inclusion of macro topics in curriculum.** This research corroborated earlier research regarding schools of social work and the inclusion of macro or policy practice in its curriculum. Respondents were clear that the education existed on some level in the program, but they were not in agreement on the depth and breadth of the education, and most mentioned the deeper learning experiences occurring in field placements or on the job (Lane, 2011; Rothman, 2013).

**Client engagement.** This research reflected earlier research regarding the practice of client engagement in the advocacy process; just one respondent referenced this practice, and only then in the context of exploring their personal comfort level in terms of ethical conflicts.

**Demographic indicators of macro involvement.** Previous research indicated that most macro-involved social workers tended to be older adults and held doctorate level education status (Wolk, 1981; Harris Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). Respondents in

this study did not follow these trends; the average age of participants 38.6 years old, and none of the eight held a doctoral degree at the time of the study.

**Ready embrace of macro and micro social work.** Participants repeatedly stated that they understood the root causes of issues that impact individuals, and several indicated that they consistently made these connections in their work. Moreover, several shared that they in fact needed to have both direct *and* policy practice incorporated in order to be inspired. This viewpoint is in agreement with that of the profession's *Code of Ethics*, that the social worker participates in direct and macro practice.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The findings in this research build upon previous research by providing input by social workers in various roles who have had experience passing or implementing social policy, and may provide guidance for social workers who are doing this work already, or for those involved in teaching future social workers. Implications for social work practice may provide guidance for social workers seeking information about effective tactics for advocacy. Schools of social work may be interested in finding ways to more effectively connect students to this work within their programs.

**Grassroots engagement.** For those sharing policy successes through the legislative process, grassroots engagement was frequently cited as an important component of the effort. Schools of social work should consider helping students understand the role of grassroots engagement and involvement of clients in macro practice work.

**Field practicums have influence.** Interview participants repeatedly referenced field practicum experience as a source of inspiration for their systems' view, as well as a source of real learning, versus that in the classroom.

**Clinical work carries credibility.** Several respondents referenced clinical work as carrying important credibility within the social policy and advocacy world. Moreover, several who had received their MSW in macro-focused tracks expressed regrets over not having had this training.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Topics for future research may include: additional research in social worker role orientations, as discussed by Cherrey Reeser (1994); a deeper look at how clinical licensure provides credibility within civic engagement work; and a further exploration of those social workers who feel that macro involvement is distasteful or inappropriate, as well as exploring further advocacy involvement. More information about effective advocacy tactics would assist to supplement this body of research, as well as further information regarding client engagement in the advocacy process. Lastly, while just one participant addressed the topic of social work ethics and potential conflicts, this would be an interesting topic to explore for future research.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The strengths of this research include its inclusion of various roles in which social workers can engage in policy practice. Limitations included a small sample size and geographical focus. This research study has both strengths and limitations due the qualitative research design, how respondents were referred and selected, and how the data were analyzed. Due to the qualitative nature of the study the sample size was limited to

only eight participants. This is a limitation because it only gathered data from a few people among a larger population of social workers who have experience working on social policy and advocacy issues.

### **Conclusion**

Social workers can be found taking part in social reform, and are effective advocates when they do so, but their overall presence in these roles is lacking in quantity. Social workers are equipped with a broad array of translatable skills which set them up for success in social reform work. The research indicates those with a clinical background carry increased credibility in the arena of politics and advocacy.

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APPENDIX A**Recruitment Email Language:**

[Individual's name, if known/"To whom it may concern," if not],  
Hello, my name is Trish Welte, and I am a graduate student in the Master of Social Work program at St. Catherine University & the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN.

I found your contact information [name of person, website etc.]. I am currently seeking participants for my final research study, which focuses on the experience of those with a degree in social work who have participated in a meaningful way in passing or implementing statewide social policy.

I am seeking participants who meet these criteria for an in-person, semi-structured interview that would last no longer than 60 minutes. If necessary, a phone or Skype option for an interview would be made available. The interview questions would be made available in advance of the interview, and results would be de-identified and confidential.

If you or your colleagues may be interested in contributing to this body of research, I would greatly appreciate your assistance in either providing them with my name and contact information, or by providing me with their contact information so that I may reach out directly.

Thank you for your time and consideration,  
Trish Welte

**Phone Script Language:**

Hello, may I please speak with [individual's name]?

My name is Trish Welte, and I am a graduate student in the Master of Social Work program at St. Catherine University & the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN.

I found your contact information [name of person, website etc.]. I am currently seeking participants for my final research study, which focuses on the experience of those with a degree in social work who have participated in a meaningful way in passing or implementing statewide social policy.

I am seeking participants who meet these criteria for an in-person, semi-structured interview that would last no longer than 60 minutes. If necessary, a phone or Skype option for an interview would be made available. The interview questions would be made available in advance of the interview, and results would be de-identified and confidential.

Would you be interested in participating in this study?

If yes, what would be a good time for us to meet for an interview?

Where would you prefer to meet [must provide appropriate level of confidentiality agreed upon by both researcher and participant]?

[If yes or if no] Can you think of one or two additional people who fit these criteria that I should reach out to?

Do you have any additional questions?

If you provide me your email, I can send the interview questions in advance.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to meeting with you. My cell phone is (612) xxx-xxxx; please do not hesitate to reach out if you think of any questions before our interview.

Goodbye and see you soon.

APPENDIX B**Social Worker Experiences in Successful Policy Implementation at the State Level  
INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM****Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating social worker experiences with successful policy implementation at the state level. This study is being conducted by Trish Welte, a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Lisa Kiesel, Ph.D., a faculty member in the Department of Social Work. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you have a social work education (B.S.W. or M.S.W.), and you have experience in successfully passing social policy or legislation. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to examine the shared experiences of social workers that have served in an effort that successfully resulted in the implementation of social policy. Approximately 10 people are expected to participate in this research.

**Procedures:**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to contact Trish Welte directly by phone or email to schedule an in-person (if necessary, accommodations may be made for telephone or Skype) interview that will be held in a location of your choosing that will also ensure a mutually comfortable level of confidentiality. The interview will be recorded for use in the study. Prior to the interview, Trish will email to you this form and the interview questions. This study will take approximately 45-60 minutes over the course of one session.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the study:**

The study has minimal risks, though will require scheduling up to an hour of the participant's time for the interview.

Aside from contributing to the body of knowledge, there are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

I will keep the research results stored on my password-protected personal laptop computer, and any hard copies (consent forms, transcripts) in a locked file cabinet in my home. Only I and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by May 18, 2016. I will then destroy all original reports,

audio files, and documents with identifying information that can be linked back to you. The recordings of the interview will only be available to me, and will be destroyed by June 1, 2016. I will be the only individual with access to audio recordings.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Catherine University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

**New Information:**

If during course of this research study I learn about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, I will inform you of these findings.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Trish Welte, at (612) 584-8885. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Dr. Lisa Kiesel, at (651) 690-6709, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or [jsschmitt@stkate.edu](mailto:jsschmitt@stkate.edu).

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study.

---

I consent to participate in the study. (If you are video- or audio-taping your subjects, include a statement such as "and I agree to be videotaped.")

---

Signature of \_\_\_\_\_ Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

---

Signature of Parent, Legal Guardian, or \_\_\_\_\_ Witness \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
(if applicable, otherwise delete this line)

---

Signature of \_\_\_\_\_ Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C

**Social Worker Experiences in  
Successful Policy Implementation at the State Level**

*Interview Questions*

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Demographic Information (please complete this section prior to scheduled interview)</b>	
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
<b>Sex</b>	
<b>Pronouns</b>	
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	
<b>Social Work Degree Obtained</b>	
<b>Licensure</b>	
<b>Professional Memberships (i.e. NASW)</b>	

1. Please share a summary of your career up to your current position.
  - Prompt: How do you think of your social work identity in this progression, and how has it evolved?
2. What was the policy issue you successfully worked on?
  - Prompts:
    - What population(s) did it primarily have impact?
    - How are people’s lives impacted by the successful implementation of this policy?
3. What was your role in this issue?
  - Prompts:
    - How did you come to be involved?
    - Can you recall the first time you became aware of this issue?
4. Who were the other key stakeholders/players/allies in this issue?
  - Prompt: What did they do that helped or hindered the success?
5. Who was in opposition to this policy?
  - Prompts:
    - What are the ways in which they opposed it?

- How did you and other stakeholders overcome this opposition?
6. Did you or the supporters of this policy make use of a grassroots campaign effort, and if so, who was engaged and how (members/voters/clients engaged)?
  7. Are there any next steps regarding this policy? Was your example part of a larger effort?
  8. What is one major factor that, had it been different, would have made the progression of this policy easier? What would be the second?
  9. Please share the reason(s) why you chose this specific policy example for discussion.
  10. Do you see social workers contributing to/participating in the policy process? How?
  11. Tell me about your SW education?
    - Prompts: What, if any, policy practice requirements were there?
    - What were your thoughts of these requirements at the time?
    - How have your thoughts changed from then to now?
    - How do you think your social work education had an impact on your efforts in this particular issue? How?