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The National Rural Social Work Caucus: 32 Years of Achievement

Address given to the 32nd Annual National Institute on Social Work and Human Services in Rural Areas

Barry L. Locke, West Virginia University

Introduction

At last year's institute, hosted by the National Rural Social Work Caucus and Western Kentucky University, some of us were talking and noted that we are seeing a number of fresh faces at these meetings. We find that an exciting development, but it also has meant we spend a lot of time trying to explain what is an organization of rumor and what is this critter known as a caucozoid (a word coined by Jim Winship as I recall)? I volunteered to talk about that proud history today, as I am likely one of the few active members remaining in this effort that was present for our first institute at the University of Tennessee in 1976.

A long and proud history of social work in rural contexts exists from the early days of the 20th century to the present. In its earliest expression much of social work practice in rural places was carried out by important local rural institutions like the Grange and the church, and with the coming of Widows Pensions and ultimately the New Deal, the public welfare sector. Emilia Martinez-Brawley has well documented this in her books addressing social work practice in rural areas (1974, 1981).

However, by the 1950s, for a variety of reasons including the re-discovery of urban poverty, the focus of the social work profession is increasingly turned to our cities and urban places. With the coming of the decades of the 50s & the 60s we find social work increasingly defined as an urban profession, with the popular view of rural America as a place populated by happy people living on their pristine family farm where life was uniformly good and the modern problems of urban life was happily avoided.

In 1969 the rebirth of interest in social work in rural areas was facilitated by a speech given by Dr. Leon Ginsberg, then Dean of the School of Social Work at West Virginia University. His address "Education for Social Work in Rural Areas," was delivered to the Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education and served as the launch point for the current rural movement and interest in rural places that causes us to be here today.

Organizational History

In 1976, the University of Tennessee, School of Social Work hosted the first of what came to be these annual institutes. That meeting also served as the founding event for the National Rural Social Work Caucus which was created at the second institute hosted by the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

As many of you may recall, we often refer to ourselves as an organization operating by rumor. This reflects the original decisions of those who came together as the caucus not to create a formal structure with by-laws, etc. This view was a result of a conviction that rural people did not much stand for formalizing structures and preferred a more informal system for operating. Over the years this has been a controversial point and continues to be a discussion point to this day (so you may hear some discussion at this meeting on this continuing issue of just structured should we be).

One result from this decision, and early on it was part of our political strategy as well, was to say that everyone who attends this conference by definition is a member of the caucus (welcome to all our new members here today as a result of our morning oath led by our very own Richard "Oz" Osburn). This has the advantage of correctly allowing us to say that we speak for the social workers that find their way to this meeting at some point and also explains why you have been invited on the program to attend the planned meeting of the caucus at this conference.

To facilitate on-going contact and conversation about rural issues in the social work profession, the Caucus set up an officer structure with a president, VP, and secretary to help us do whatever business was necessary. Additionally, we also had volunteer representatives from each Federal region. We have tended to move away from that model these days and while retaining the officers structure, have people volunteer for the executive committee and other task committee that are identified from time to time.

Historically and currently, we have an official business session at this annual meeting and then use other meetings around the country, e.g.

the APM at CSWE as networking opportunities to get together and review common issues or concerns that we may have. Today we continue to operate under this model-one of my colleagues suggests

that we are a favorite example of what he calls a "commons" (Lohmann, 1992). As applied to the voluntary sector, this is a concept where people with common interests and goals come together and commit to achieve them. Thus far, our structure, or lack of it as you prefer, has supported our achieving the purposes set forth for the National Rural Social Work Caucus in the late 1970s.

Achievements

The Annual Institute Probably the most important activity that the caucus has taken on has been the recruitment of colleges and universities to host the *Annual National Institute on Social Work and Human Services* each year. The original plan, which I personally think still works well for us, was to move the meeting around the country by identifying an institution that identified with the social work mission to serve rural places and the people that live there to serve as the Institute host. We are now in our 32nd year and we have met in most rural areas of the United States. This is our first trip to Alabama and we are most pleased to be in this part of the world. Looking to the future, we hope to partner with institution in the upper great plains, the southwest, and possibly Canada.

Each institute is planned and hosted by the selected college or university and the role of the caucus is to pass on our traditions and expectations, as assist in marketing the annual institute as members travel around the country. For example, each year the West Virginia NASW Chapter hosts a networking session of the annual institute to market it to social workers attending their annual conference. As I think about our efforts over the years some of the key ideas that have guided the institutes are:

- A. A goal of blending education and practice in our program by highlighting the rural context and culture where we are meeting
- B. Program content should clearly reflect links to the rural context and issues
- C. The program should reflect the value of music in rural cultures
- D. The host institution would produce a set of conference proceedings.

On the logistics side, we felt that meeting in smaller venues helped to keep the informal nature of our group intact and hopefully would keep the registration costs lower, and to a degree we have succeeded in this. From the beginning we encouraged the involvement of our families at this event and that has made it richer as well. One change I have noted is that we are a bit less dorm dependent these days. I assume that has something to do with the aging process for many of us and less flexible bones for those dorm beds.

As with any effective movement, we have our traditions. Each institute produces t-shirts-several have come to adorn our beautiful caucus quilt. A recent addition, the quilt travels to the next conference site to be displayed for all to enjoy as we convene there. We have our own song and it captures wonderfully well who we are and what we hope to achieve. We have been blessed to have the past conferences well documented in photographs and Bob Rich, Eastern Washington University, has created a wonderful media presentation based on them. I look forward to seeing what new traditions we may add as we move forward.

Influencing the Social Work Profession I am aware that there has been at least one dissertation that looked at the Caucus and its impact on the issues associated with social work practice in rural areas. Michael Jacobsen (1985), who was one of the early leader's of this effort, did that work. His research investigated the role of the caucus in helping interest in rural practice issues come to the forefront during the 1969-1984 period. He concluded that the caucus had played a significant role in focusing the social work profession on rural places and the social issues to be found in them.

Specifically, he credited the leadership of Steve Webster and Paul Campbell, who had planned and hosted the first institute at the University of Tennessee as being instrumental in getting professional bodies like NASW, CSWE, and the American Public Welfare Association to give more attention to rural concerns (1985).

In fact, the Caucus was responsible for introducing the policy statement on rural areas that continues to be part of the NASW policy statements found in *Social Work Speaks* (2003). The caucus was also responsible for the most recent re-inclusion of the statement on rural social work practice and continues to monitor changes that be necessary for its continuing inclusion as a professional policy statement in our profession.

The rural social work caucus quickly became an important support mechanism for CSWE accredited programs in rural areas. The late John O'Neill, who was the Dean at Eastern Washington University,

was one of the early actors who carried these concerns to the Council on Social Work Education. An early concern centered on the perception that the accreditation standards were problematic for rural programs, as they appeared to be established for large city urban institutions. While that point has yet to be conclusively proven, the network that has developed within the caucus for social work educators has proven helpful in supporting rural programs in demonstrating that they meet the professional accrediting standards, thus demonstrating they are quality programs.

A number of early key members of the caucus have gone on to Deanships and senior faculty positions and continue to challenge the profession to attend to the issues and needs of rural areas. Thus the Caucus was a vehicle for growing professional leaders in social work education and practice who care about the issues and concerns of rural people.

Scholarship The caucus has played a very important role in growing a body of professional knowledge that supports social work practice in rural areas. From the first institute at the University of Tennessee, the college or university that served as host has tried to produce some kind of published document showcasing the research and scholarship presented there. Several conference proceedings have been produced that have been important contributors to the knowledge base for professional practice in rural areas. Additionally, some of the institutes have produced published books (the 23rd hosted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the 26th hosted by the University of Texas-Austin).

The caucus was instrumental in establishing a newsletter that grew to become a professional journal - Human Services in the Rural Environment (HSITRE). HSITRE was supported for many years by the School of Social Work at Eastern Washington University under the capable editorship of Dr. Lynne Morris. As resources became limited, it was not possible for EWU to continue to support the journal and lacking a successor institution it was discontinued.

Currently the caucus, under the leadership of Dr. Mike Daley, is introducing an electronic journal that will be hosted by the Rural Social Work Caucus. The journal will be known as the Journal of Contemporary Rural Social Work and will begin accepting abstracts in the fall of 2007.

Transitioning to the Future The National Rural Social Caucus has a proud history of achievement over the past 32 years and we look forward from this place with continuing optimism. Viable organizations remain so by taking a look at where they are from time to time and as we come together again for the 32nd time, I think it is

also important to think about our future.

I see the National Rural Social Work Caucus as being in a time of transition. Most of the original founders have moved on to other professional opportunities or retired and in at least a few cases passed on from this life. As is true in solid organizations, new leadership is in place and the commitment to this commons remains strong. I hope each of you will continue to be part of this on-going effort and help us become even stronger as a voice for rural issues.

I thought I would end this review of the caucus by looking into the cloudy crystal ball of our future and the caucus:

- I think it is important to find a way to create some formal structure that we can use to get ourselves invited to the various policy discussions that take place at the federal and state levels that impact our rural places. (Finding ways to work with Rural Policy Research Institute comes to mind for me).
- If history is a good predictor, issues like immigration reform, health reform, and economic development are likely to have impacts for rural people beyond initial understandings of most policy makers and the caucus may want to create expertise that can respond to such opportunities as they are discovered.
- While we know about us, how do we reach out to others within our profession who may have rural interests, but for whatever reasons may never heard of this organization that operates by rumor? How do the spread the rumor more effectively and hopefully gather others with us?
- While the announcement that we will be creating an electronic journal is welcome news, our challenge will be how do we support it? I believe the need remains for such a resource.
- How do we facilitate an on-going dialogue about rural issues-for example, Mike Daley is raising again the question of rural uniqueness-that is a question of merit for us and I wonder if there are others we could identify that others might work on for the caucus to develop our knowledge base as we move forward?
- Finally, should the caucus try to establish some on-going relationships with the international social welfare community? A couple of years ago I have the pleasure of attending a weeklong meeting in Virginia focused around international rural policy needs and issues. There were participants from 48 nations present at that meeting and the common ground with our issues was very apparent

to me. Maybe leadership will come forward that will help us to establish stronger ties internationally.

I am certain that you may have other thoughts or recommendations that we need to attend to as well and I hope you will share them. The point is that our work needs to continue and I hope this "traveling road show" will continue to show up somewhere around this great nation of ours every summer. Thank you for this opportunity today.

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