

Social Workers' Suggestions for Effective Rural Practice

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ABSTRACT

Two focus groups of participants at a national rural social work conference answered the research question, "What are your suggestions for engaging in effective social worker practice in rural areas?" The participants offered specific recommendations for social work practice with rural people and communities. They supported these recommendations with illustrations from their experiences as social work practitioners in rural settings. Text data drawn from transcribed audiotapes of the focus groups were coded into open, axial, and selective data themes. While generalizability is limited, this small sample of social workers offered a glimpse of their views of rural practice. They offered practical, down-to-earth advice for rural social work practitioners within main data themes of community, connections, generalist practice, and diversity.

Imagine that Jane Smith accepted her first social work position in an agency that serves a population of 3,000 people spread across 4,500 square miles. What will Jane need to know to engage in effective social work practice in this rural area? What will Jane need to do to engage in culturally competent practice with rural people, groups, families, organizations, and communities? This exploratory, qualitative study asked social workers who identified themselves as having expertise in rural social work to provide social work practice advice for social workers who work with diverse rural populations, that is, "rural cultures" (National Association of Social Workers, 2003, p. 300). The primary research question was, "What are your suggestions for engaging in effective social work practice in rural areas?" Many social workers work with rural or non-

metropolitan residents from areas with 50,000 people or less; rural people compose more than 25% of the U.S. population and occupy over 83% of the U.S. terrain (Ginsberg, 2004; Hickman, 2004; United States Department of Agriculture, 2004). Following the Jane Smith example, one assumption of this study is that social workers practicing with millions of rural people, living across the majority of the nation's land, may benefit from the practice wisdom of other rural social workers as drawn from exploratory research.

Background Literature

The research knowledge base for social work practice in rural areas is at a curiously early state of development, given

the profession's core concept of the person-in-environment and a "time-honored heritage" of encouraging the development of generalist practice skills (Davenport & Davenport, 1998, p. 50). Much of the profession's knowledge base about rural social work practice is formulated from narratives, case studies, and conceptual models of rural people and communities. Waltman's (1986) seminal narrative on social work practice in rural areas asserted that rural people tend to value self-reliance, local autonomy, helping one's neighbors, tradition, and institutions such as "families, schools, churches, service clubs, cooperative extension services, and farmers' organizations" (p. 470). Martinez-Brawley (1990) summarized practice narratives to suggest that the social workers in rural areas employ community-oriented practice. Riebschleger (2005) described strategies to facilitate rural community planning groups. Fiske (2003) described the challenges and rewards of social work practice in rural areas, such as multiple client needs, being "the only social worker" (p. 14), collaborative teamwork, autonomous practice, and helping rural people improve their quality of life. Fitchen (1998) used national census data and a case study from New York State to illustrate that rural areas tend to have more dispersed and widespread poverty than urban areas. Green, Johnson, Bremseth, and Tracy (1998) suggested that homelessness in rural Ohio children could be a "symptom of increasing rural poverty" (p. 315).

Some studies suggested that social workers and other professionals working in rural areas learned to deal with the consistent dearth of formal resources (Jacobson, 2002; Newfield, Pratt, & Locke, 2003). Dunbar (1999) described how a rural California county strengthened the local social services network through creative, collaborative, flexible, and integrated interagency services and funding. Davenport and Davenport (1998) described a model framework of interdisciplinary education and practice collaboration that was developed within a rural Wyoming human services project. Similarly, Van Hook & Ford (1998) emphasized a linkage model among mental health professionals and service organizations located in rural communities. Jensen & Royeen (2002) asserted that the best practice outcomes among rural interdisciplinary health education projects involved integration of area "connections, community, and culture" (p. 119).

A rural social work framework blending systems, social exchange and the strengths perspective was proposed by Daley and Avant (2004). McNellie's (2001) model of the advanced rural generalist practitioner included descrip-

tions of simultaneous micro-, mezzo-, and, especially, macro-system-level interventions. An international model called participatory rural appraisal included ethnographic "insider" perspectives of rural people constructed within a rapidly sequenced assessment process (Bar-On & Prinsen, 1999). Herzig and Murphy's (1997) model of rural services in Great Britain recommended financial incentives to encourage health care providers to work in rural areas.

Murty (2004), as well as Scales and Streeter (2004), applied community assets models within rural contexts.

Some of the research on rural social work practice studied the extent of differences in social work practice in rural and urban areas. Croxton, Jayaratne, & Mattison (2002) surveyed a random sample of National Association of Social Workers (NASW) members and found rural and urban social workers reported many similar practice behaviors and beliefs except in areas of bartering and dual rela-

tionships. York, Denton, & Moran (1989) found no significant differences in social work roles, levels of specialization, use of informal helping networks, and perceptions of clients within data drawn from a North Carolina NASW member survey. In one of the few rural studies to use statistical analyses, Landsman (2002) found that among Missouri child welfare survey respondents, the variable *rurality* predicted a number of statistically significant outcome variables, for example, more practice experience, autonomy/decision making, agency fairness, agency support, inadequate resources, work overload, community stress, job opportunities, professional growth, and job satisfaction.

Some research studies on rural practice examined rural population needs and recommended practice interventions. Calloway, Fried, Johnsen, & Morrissey (1999) discovered that rural North Carolina residents received less mental health care than urban residents. Miller and Conway (2002) found that a sample of Western social workers described rural poverty as "common and extreme" (p. 14). Templeton & Mitchell (2004) said that 50 social work focus group participants at a Texas NASW conference reported that while "basic family needs [were similar] regardless of locale, the need is magnified by the rural context" (p. 199). They recommended practice strategies of building relationships, promoting collaboration, celebrating strengths, increasing awareness of services, securing grant funding, using technology, and empowering rural people through political advocacy (Templeton & Mitchell, 2004).

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Other literature examined rural social work practice by specific types of practice methods and/or target populations. Gumpert and Saltman's (1998) survey of rural practitioners identified unique challenges to group work interventions in rural areas, for example, distrust of outsiders, less confidentiality, longer travel distances, insufficient numbers of people with a common problem, and lack of transportation. Locke and Potter (2004) described policy intervention implications for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients in West Virginia. Harper and Lantz (1992) proposed interventions, such as social skills training, cultural validation, and peer networks, that may decrease the "cultural confusion" of rural children moving to urban areas (p. 177). Butler (2004) suggested methods of working with elderly people in rural regions. School social workers reported strengthened educational systems and communities through collaboration interventions (Caudill, 1993). Finally, knowledge about social work practice and research in rural areas may be drawn from the literature of other professions. Sociologists, psychologists, and educators studied rural poverty (Brown & Lichter, 2004; Snyder & McLaughlin, 2004), traditional and nontraditional gender roles (Bettencourt & Molix, 2003; Little & Jones, 2000), and the "changing rural scene" associated with forces such as globalization (Schroth, Pankake, Fullwood, & Gates, 2001, p. 10). Health planners, nurses, and physicians offered practice suggestions to improve the accessibility and quality of rural health care, such as increasing transportation (National Rural Health Association, n.d.), social support (Letvak, 2002), informal resources (McCabe & Macnee, 2002), and resource linkages (Yuen, Gerdes, & Gonzales, 1996). Keller, Murray, and Hargrove (1999) said that rural research should include context variables, avoid simple urban-rural comparisons, and study rural community functions. Therefore, social workers may benefit from extrapolating practice implications from the literature of other rural researchers and professionals, as well as using the social work profession's research narratives, case studies, conceptual models, and emerging research studies.

Methods

Eleven social workers participated in two focus groups held during the 2003 conference of the National Institute on Social Work and Human Services in Rural Areas (NISWH-SRA), also known as the National Rural Social Work

Caucus. They were recruited by a flyer in the conference handout packet and an announcement from NISWH-SRA leadership during a conference plenary session. The primary investigator served as facilitator for the focus groups. Following the recommendations of Krueger (1994), as well as Strauss and Corbin (1990), focus group topic questions included flexible probes. Topic questions were formulated to answer the primary research, "What are your suggestions for engaging in effective social work practice in rural areas?" Topic questions asked participants to provide specific suggestions for effective rural social work practice, entering rural communities for beginning practice, and social work education about rural practice. The questions asked participants to describe their experiences of practicing social work in rural areas. Some probes were broad and exploratory; some were more specific and directly tied to the rural social work practice literature.

Focus group discussions were audiotaped and fully transcribed. Data were analyzed using the open, axial, and selective coding systems (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Triangulation of data was used to increase the validity of the reported findings, which included field notes of the primary investigator, focus group transcriptions, and participant feedback to the facilitator's summary comments near the close of each focus group; information drawn from rural social work practice literature; and a check-in session with participants at the 2004 NISWH-SRA conference, that is, including many of the original focus group participants. Additionally, two focus group participants provided mailed, written feedback for a draft of the data analyses. Results were tabulated by data themes, with specific practice suggestions. It is important to note that data themes were included in the tabulation *only* if they appeared in both focus groups, appeared multiple times within each focus group, and were offered by more than one focus group participant. Thus, only the most frequent rural practice suggestions were reported. Interrater reliability was used for the coding of data into selective coding systems. The interrater reliability for assignment of focus group text data into selective coding themes was .89.

All participants said they had rural social work practice experiences. The duration of reported participants' practice experience ranged from 6 months to 35 years, with a mean of 25 years. Six reported working in direct social work practice at the time of the focus groups. Five said they were currently university educators. All participants were Caucasian. Six were women. Seven participants reported holding a

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master's degree; four reported holding a doctoral degree. Notably, 5 of the 11 participants had published within the rural social work practice literature. The participants lived within 10 different states, including regions such as the U.S. Northeast, Atlantic coast, Midwest, South, and West. Therefore, this sample of focus group participants appeared to have significant rural practice experience and geographic diversity.

Results

Results of the focus group data analyses clustered within main descriptive themes of community, connections, generalist practice, and diversity. Each data theme aligned with social work respondents' most frequently recommended rural practice suggestions.

Community

Focus group participants described communities beyond the "rural divide":

Here, and in the rest of the country, they call [rural communities] "downstate."

It's New York or upstate. It's the east side or the west side of the state of Washington. You're always going to have the rural divide somewhere.

Focus group participants offered much rich information about social work practice across the rural divide. They recommended that social workers in rural areas engage in ongoing community practice assessment and intervention, deal with high rates of poverty and scarce resources, use abundant informal community resources, and adjust to a slower pace of community and change.

Engage in ongoing community practice assessment and intervention. One participant said, "The community *is* the client. Our role is more than just agency-based." Focus group participants strongly suggested that social work practitioners engage in ongoing, comprehensive, rural community assessment and interventions to help meet community needs. They indicated that the assessment process included learning the history of the community. One participant said, "There's a much higher level of investment in history in rural communities." Another responded, "People know their history, and they live their history on a daily basis ... social workers should strive to understand rural people, families, groups, and especially, communities."

Participants said social work assessments should consider the "community in environment," that is, social and economic contexts. They said that some may view rural communities from socially constructed perspectives of an "idyllic ... romantic" community and/or the "problem community." They recommended that social workers "get the facts" about rural communities to avoid "unrealistic,

idyllic expectations of rural areas," "disenchantment with rural areas," and a "problem-focused approach that ignores community strengths." Focus group participants recommended that social workers systematically assess unique community strengths, challenges, and "vertical and horizontal structure."

At the same time, participants reported that rural communities are strongly impacted by economic globalization, with accompanying "service downsizing, regionalization, consolidation of services, and services tending to move further away." They described "extraction economies," whereby "carpetbaggers come in and take things out and give nothing back to the community," for example, oil, coal, copper, granite, and timber. Participants noted that globalization contributed to rural community concerns about "youth drain," that is, young people of the community leaving to pursue more abundant jobs in urban areas. The loss of the young people of the community was said to "further erode" the economic status of the community, traditional extended family systems, and the ability to recruit/retain services professionals. Participants noted that large corporations and suburban sprawl have "eroded and invaded" rural communities such that many are "disappearing" and/or "homogenized ... they all begin to look alike."

Deal with high rates of poverty and scarce formal resources. Ten of the 11 focus group participants discussed rural poverty and a dearth of formal resources and services in rural areas. Participants said that rural social workers must be prepared to work in areas that have "proportionately more poor people." They described rural people who "have to work so hard at, like a job and a half, to sustain their lifestyle ... economically." One said, "Rural communities are the last to gain advantage when things go up, and ... the first to be disadvantaged when things go down." Another described social work practice amid pervasive poverty:

You deal with people who are not necessarily desperate but who are definitely doing without.... Heat or eat ... those are the issues that confront everybody, but I think they confront people in rural areas for a longer period of time.

One participant said economic status was worsened when "rural communities have to compete with urban areas for resources." In addition, a number of participants pointed out that there were frequently insufficient social and health care services in rural areas. Specialized services were reportedly particularly difficult to access. Focus group participants suggested that social workers be prepared to work with people living in poverty and within an insufficient formal social welfare network. However, they also cautioned social workers to remember that rural areas also have wealthy residents.

Use abundant informal community resources.

Participants suggested that social workers identify and use “abundant informal resources” in rural areas. A participant said, “Understanding the informal system is as powerful and effective as partnering with the formal systems ... there’s a lot of informal, very powerful networks.” Another responded by suggesting that informal systems be identified within ongoing community assessment, “I think you need to see what resources exist in the community and how things get done formally and informally.”

Focus group participants further explained that informal networks included mutual aid, or “neighbors helping neighbors.” Nearly every participant emphasized that people in rural communities often help each other when needs arise. They pointed out that social workers were similarly held to a standard of “community accountability” and “good citizenship.” Social workers, participants said, must “come through for the community,” “look for opportunities to get involved in the community,” and “ask for help” from rural residents when formal resources are not sufficient/available.

Adjust to a slower pace of community and change. Two participants listed a “slower ... less rushed ... pace of life” as a benefit of rural living. Seven of the participants noted that this slower pace also applied to the pace of rural community change. They said, “You can make change, but it goes very slow.” Focus group participants postulated about rationales for slower change in rural communities: “Maybe some of the old-timers are afraid of change”; “Rural areas have traditional values”; and “They know the history and the families ... they may know better than the social worker about how the change might impact family A or family B.”

Rural focus group participants described rural communities as “very political.” Within this political context, they recommended that social workers “empower rural people” within by involving them in collaborative change efforts and seeking rural resident leadership. Other recommendations included being politically astute, dealing with conflict effectively, setting “realistic time frames” for change efforts, and especially “being patient.” One participant summarized rural community change as “a process”; another participant replied, “It may take a while, but change really *does* occur ... rural communities are changing all the time.”

Connections

Over and over again, focus group participants emphasized ubiquitous connections among rural residents, families, groups, organizations, and communities. They claimed these myriad connections offered practice complications and advantages. They also noted that disconnections existed in rural social work practice. They suggested that social workers need to understand that nearly everything is connected; manage intersecting roles; use relationship connections to affect change; and span the disconnections of geographic distances and professional isolation.

Understand that nearly everything is connected.

Repeatedly, participants described multiple connections between rural residents, families, groups, organizations, and communities. They said, “Just about everything is connected.” One said, “This client is related to that client, and the social worker may not know it.” One described “a local telegraph”:

I can say something in a rural community that’s going to upset Carol, but Carol and I better be able to face each other tomorrow. Because if we can’t face each other tomorrow, then ... a portion of that small rural community has just splintered. So you have to have extra sensitivity.

According to the participants, this sensitivity should include attention to “personalized relationships,” assumptions that client systems may know each other, and interactions with rural people in both professional and personal arenas.

Manage intersecting roles. Participants described “a lack of anonymity” and “intersecting roles” in rural communities. Some called this the “goldfish effect”; that is, rural people observed the personal and professional actions of the social workers and others. One said: “My clients knew my car. They knew where I lived. They knew my family.” Another added,

You’re in the supermarket checkout lane [with clients] ... and your children are playing baseball with your clients’ children.... At times, our many roles intersect. It’s impossible for that not to happen.

Several described new social workers that left rural practice reportedly because “in a rural community, nothing is truly private ... the new social workers were upset. For them, it was intrusive.” One added, “Social work consumers have almost a better understanding of this [intersecting roles].... I mean they interact at the store. They say ‘hi’ and are on their merry way.” The participants suggested a number of strategies for responding to close and intersecting relationships in rural areas; one should learn the connections among people; extend friendliness and a “personal touch” in interactions; arrange in advance with clients how they would like to handle contact in other settings; and be “absolutely vigilant” in engaging in ethical practice related to any intersecting professional roles. They said rural social workers were challenged to “try ... to keep personal and professional lives as separate as possible,” as well as “doing our very best to preserve client confidentiality.”

Use closer relationships to affect change. At least half of the participants described professional interactions as “closer” and “more personalized.” A majority of participants said that closer relationships were “tools of change” for joining forces with others:

People who say what they mean and mean what they say ... those are the kinds of people you want to ... utilize in a partnership because those are the kinds of people who make things go. It's the person more than the role. It can be the butcher ... the nurse ... doctor ... farmer ... school secretary ... the person who runs the greenhouse ... the banker...It's that capacity of follow through, integrity, and making good choices for the community as a whole.

Participants suggested that community residents were more likely to accept change ideas from the "people who make things go." They advised recruiting these leaders to spearhead change.

Focus group participants repeatedly described how rural social workers used relationships to form informal collaboration teams with other professionals and community residents. One said, "Sometimes client situations are so complicated, we just have to put our heads together to try to figure out what to do." Most of the participants described examples of using relationships to connect people with existing resources and to create new resources.

Span the disconnections of geographic distances and professional isolation. Participants also discussed spanning disconnections, that is, geographic and professional isolation. For example, traveling was frequently brought up in focus group discussions about social work services delivery in rural areas: "I don't want to talk about driving (laughing), but I want to say probably one of the single biggest problems in rural ... health care and resources is transportation." One participant gave an example of a social worker traveling a 12-hour round-trip for a meeting. Participant suggestions for spanning the geographic distances within social work practice included ensuring transportation mechanisms and costs are built into rural programs; creating/modifying organizational policies to assist with rural travel challenges; and increasing use of technological connections, that is, electronic mail/chat-rooms, telephone calls, and interactive television linkages. However, the most frequently referenced comment about spanning the geographic distances in rural social work practice was simply, "Expect to do a lot of driving around"; and "If you want to work in a rural area, you better like driving!"

Participants described professional isolation: "The downside of rural practice is professional isolation." Others added, "You're isolated from your peers ... other social workers.... You're not able to get together in a group ... because you may be the only social worker in the community.... A lot of people experience a lack of professional support." Another participant disagreed:

I don't feel isolated at all. I drive to my job, where I have a professional community. Then I have a

statewide professional community ... so I don't feel professional isolation at all, and I live in one of the most rural frontier states in the country.

One of the participants offered a similar strategy of "making ... a professional network":

When I first moved to [a rural] county, one of the first things I did was to drive an hour and a half to NASW meetings ... but the other thing I've always done is to network with other professionals. I have good friends who are nurses ... we sometimes get together to have lunch ... I took the [contact] initiative.

Several participants indicated that social workers could interact with other professionals by creating small, multi-professional groups within or between agency personnel.

The participants predicted that computers and other technological communication systems could increase professional support for future rural social workers. Several built on this idea to suggest that technology could be used to increase rural social workers' access to multiprofessional teams, continuing professional education, specialty client services, and information exchanges for clinical practice.

Generalist Practice

Every focus group participant said social workers in rural areas are generalists: For example, "they need to be eclectic" and "they are advanced generalists." One argued the generalist model of social work was developed in rural areas and that "it has been adopted and accommodated to urban areas." Participants' generalist practice theme suggestions included: Use generalist practice skills; identify the rewards and challenges of rural practice; consult with or team with others; and be flexible, creative, and innovative.

Use generalist practice skills. Participants described generalist practice skills that included simultaneous multiple systems interventions, use of professional self, and self-awareness. A participant described rural social work practice:

It's real basic, wonderful generalist social work practice. You ... work with individuals. You work with extended families ... you work with systems ... and community level ... and you do organizational changes ... you advocate for policy change ... you do it all at once.

Participants also emphasized the purposeful use of self within rural *and* urban generalist practice:

Social work's tool is professional use of self. So you do things purposely. You know what you're doing. Anybody can be a good person or talk with anybody

else. But the idea of knowing what you're doing and having a goal and some immediate interventions ... makes for professional social work.

Similarly, they supported generalist practitioner "self-awareness" and urged practitioners to value and respect the worldviews of rural people:

I think people going into rural practice need to be aware of their own values... They need to have a humility and respect for ... the people who live there ... and their views of the world.... You're not just someone who is coming in, improving the culture ... you assume that they [rural people] know a better way than you probably do.

Identify rural practice rewards and challenges. Within generalist social work practice, the focus group participants identified a number of lifestyle benefits of living in a rural area, ranging from "home-cooked meals" and "less traffic" to "reasonable housing" and "quality of life." More than half said rural social work practice provided benefits of "more independence," "more autonomy," and "seeing clients make progress." One described, "You can be independent ... self-directed.... I don't have to check in every time I'm going to do something in a rural community." Another said, "There are less agency imposed rules ... less bureaucracy." Three participants declared that rural social work practice provided more opportunities to watch clients' progress; for example, "You can see the results because that teenager that you worked with might still live there 10 years down the road."

Focus group participants used the metaphor of "big fish in a small pond" to describe the influence/status of some professionals within rural communities: For example, "I've always felt like you're more important to your customers." Two focus group participants identified that the status and influence provided extensive opportunities to "get involved" and to "be influential." One said, "There's little in social welfare in [my state] that I am not associated with if I chose to be.... And if you like these kinds of opportunities, the rural context is going to present them more frequently and quicker."

Focus group participants were quick to point out that significant rural social work practice rewards, such as high status and more career opportunities, also came with significant challenges, such as professional and geographic isolation. Participants stressed that practice rewards were accompanied by "high expectations of professional service" to rural people, families, groups, organizations and communities. Participants especially emphasized that the greatest challenge of all was the heavy workload of rural social workers: "With autonomy, comes responsibility." Another said, "You have more responsibilities ... you're going to have the weight of an entire community on your shoulders." Another pointed out that effective outcomes often led

to more service requests: "People call you up and say, 'Joe told me I should call you because I was looking for this, and you helped him get it.'" All of the participants expressed concerns about heavy workloads in rural social work practice, such as:

I remember being in Appalachia and being the only social worker in the county.... [I'd] get phone calls at all different times of the night.... In a rural community, I'm a social worker 24/7.... There's no downtime.

They recommended that rural social workers learn to manage time and stress well.

Particularly within service provision to clients with severe and/or multiple needs, focus group participants said that rural social workers coped with heavy workloads and limited local services by engaging in an informal system of quid pro quo resource sharing. Resource sharing examples included accessing and providing information; "stretching" agency client entry criteria; "leaping bureaucratic barriers" to assist clients with special needs for whom there were no community services; and creating small, multiprofessional, multiagencies or other collaborative arrangements. One explained,

In rural areas, no matter how serious the case is, I've got it ... it's challenging and exciting, and you really have to know a lot. And you can't have a big ego about what you know because what you need to know is so much more than any one person can possibly know. Accessing other professionals, and their insights, it's just essential.

Another participant said this process could involve "taking turns." "Sometimes I had to find a way to serve a client that our agency might not normally serve because [a colleague from another agency] was in a bind. But then when I needed something from [the colleague], it was my turn to make a request." Another explained that "keeping tabs" within resource exchanges also pertained an array of community residents:

Let's say you approach the Lions Club to get help get a pair of glasses for a 9-year-old who has used up his every-two-years allotment from Medicaid. When the Lions club calls for a speaker for their next meeting, you're gonna be getting out the 3x5 cards.

One participant noted, "The worst thing you can do in a rural area is to give out some kind of bureaucratic babble for not helping."

Be flexible, creative, and innovative. Focus group participants indicated that rural social workers were often flexible, creative, and innovative in ways that often extended beyond agency-based traditional interventions.

Participants said, “You need flexibility”; “You can be professionally creative”; and “You work with individuals ... families, systems, and communities ... you do it all at once. It’s a fabulous way of testing your creative uses.” One said there was a need for “making different creative kinds of arrangements that didn’t exist before”; for example, “There’s a community with a local hospital ... that couldn’t afford a full-time social worker on its staff, so the mental health center came up with the other .5 FTE for the one position, and they share it.” Another explained, “I have to be more creative ... the amount funded for social work gets less and less.” In one of the focus groups, an example of a creative intervention involving “barter” was discussed throughout. Several group participants said barter meant not only in-kind exchanges among community residents but also contributing resources to a collaborative endeavor: “I just got several people from a small community to build a ramp for somebody who has MS. Maybe one of those people who built the ramp has a teenager in trouble who needs a mentor. The person the ramp was built for might be a good mentor.” Another responded:

You got the people together. They helped build the ramp. You got the lumberyard to donate materials. You got a service group ... or a businessperson ... or the high school kids ... you got them to build it. And now there’s lumber leftover ... you know that by getting this project done, it’s more likely to lead to another. The high school kid is more likely to help out the next time. It’s kind of a domino thing.

Advocate for increased content about rural practice within social work education. While several educators described rural practice content available at their universities, all said there was a need for increased curriculum content in social work education overall. They suggested that this could be done through application of rural practice strategies within future social work education ventures; for example, “We need to be flexible in social work education, too.” Three of the participants suggested teaming with educators from other disciplines and professions. For example, one said: “We’re hearing ... that the rural health community is very well organized ... by and large, has a good deal of resources. It’s fairly cohesive, and we have a lot to learn from that.”

The focus group participants suggested specific curriculum content for social work practice; for example, “We need to teach social work students how to practice in multidisciplinary teams.” The participants recommended that rural social workers advocate for more content on rural practice within social work education. They suggested that social work educators (1) increase curriculum content on rural social work practice, (2) include rural/urban context within student self-awareness and person-in-environment assessment activities, (3) define rural people as a diverse group,

(4) include content on social welfare policy impacts on rural areas, and (5) provide field placements in rural areas. They acknowledged accessing sufficient field supervisors in rural areas could be a challenge. They suggested that social work programs respond to this challenge by using flexibility, creativity, and innovation within development of new rural internship sites.

Diversity

Social work participants said that rural people should be considered an at-risk or diverse group based on their high rates of poverty, lower life opportunities, and stigmatized social status. They explained that a high level of expected rural community accountability and a “more collective” community orientation were similar to those of other disenfranchised groups who banded together to survive. One explained, “Rural people have a high level of accountability to each other and ... rural communities and cultural or ethnic enclaves come together for survival.” Focus group participants described other common diverse group characteristics that appeared to pertain to rural people. For example, they said characteristics of rural populations included diversity within and between the groups, local customs and values, distrust of “outsiders,” language differences, more traditional gender roles, extended family kinship systems, and a shared experience of stigma associated with the greater social environment, that is, rural stereotypes, such as “uneducated hillbillies.” Within the diversity theme, respondents recommended social workers use cultural competency skills, seek insider status, and advocate for social justice for rural areas.

Use cultural competency skills. The focus group participants repeatedly called for increased “cultural competency” for living and working in rural areas. One stated:

All those things we learned about practice probably go anywhere but to be successful ... to survive, to do it well in a rural areas, you have to be culturally competent about what it is to be rural ... You can’t go in as a outsider and expect change.

Another responded with an example of activities to increase cultural competence:

You have to learn the community values and the unwritten rules.... You’ve got to listen a lot.... You’ve got to know people on one side of the mountain are different from people on the other side of the mountain and ... people way up in the mountain are different from town people.... It’s the whole notion of diversity within groups.

Participants described components of culturally competent practice. They said social workers should “gain trust and build relationships”; “employ extra sensitivity” within

interactions; listen well; learn local customs and values; assess between and within-group differences; work with extended families and groups; connect with "trusted institutions;" build on strengths; and empower others.

Seek insider group status. Focus group respondents spent a good deal of time discussing the difficulties of acquiring needed in-group status in rural areas. They reported that community residents assessed new professionals:

Rural people kind of want to feel you out, so in some ways, it's an assessment period (others in group nodding).... At first, they're not going to trust you at all, but once they trust you, you're all the way in.

Participants described strategies for getting "all the way in," that is, becoming a trusted "insider." They suggested that a professional new to the area needs "be seen with somebody who is important to the community"; "You have to request a cultural guide, and if you don't get one, you aren't going in." A participant said, "It helps to have a local sponsor of some kind ... a trusted gatekeeper in the community." Another said,

If you work in multiple counties, you need at least one person in each county who is established, trusted ... an entry person ... a door opener. It's like finding the right key ... someone locally who can help with the legitimizing process ... who says you're okay.

Several participants said they were able to become "insiders" when they told residents they had a partner or relative from the area. Other "insider" status access activities included associating with "trusted institutions" in the community ("It can be a bank, a school, a church, university extension services."); attending community festivals and cultural events ("You'd better go to their activities."); engaging in community service ("Volunteer for boards and service clubs."); and regularly visiting local gathering places:

If you're not familiar with a community.... I think one of the best things to do is to find out where everybody eats breakfast.... You're going to sit down at the bar stool for a while, and you're not going to sit with everyone else. But you keep showing up day after day, and eventually they're going to let you in.

Identify impacts of rural stigma. Social work focus group participants claimed rural people are negatively impacted by stereotypes of rural people and accompanying social stigma. Respondents said, "Rural people are often made fun of in the media. Think of the Beverly Hillbillies ... Green Acres ... people who are uneducated, silly." They strongly recommended social workers recognize "urban bias ... the social assumption that urban living is more

desirable." Participants said social workers should be aware of rural stereotypes, "Stereotypes reinforce social stigma ... toward rural people ... and that affects community self-concept."

Several focus group participants noted that some rural people were sensitive about "not talking good." Participants explained this meant having an accent, using improper grammar, and using local language terms. One said, "Where I live they call this Appalachian English ... they may be threatened by people who talk like those on the radio." One respondent indicated that he kept a professional language style in his interactions with rural people, but "I occasionally change my cadence, and I do choose my words carefully."

Advocate for social justice for rural areas. Focus group participants encouraged antistigma advocacy to reduce negative stereotypes about rural people, whom they claimed were oppressed and marginalized by the greater social world. The social workers also said informal linkages and closer relationships could be useful for strengthening political and legislative advocacy with an objective to obtain more equitable access to resources for rural residents.

Focus group participants also said rural areas sometimes demonstrated within-group discrimination, including labeling people living in poverty and engaging in racism, sexism, and homophobia. For example, one said, "In rural communities, the class stratification is more set. People know who the families in poverty are." Another said, "People of color and women are far more likely to be poor in rural areas, too." Several participants said that rural responses to gay and/or lesbian people varied, that is, "Rural people are often more accepting of diverse family structures because they are used to extended families ... they may be less tolerant if the community has strong ties to fundamental religious values."

Participants recommended advocacy for people who were oppressed within the community and/or by the greater social environment. They especially recommended advocacy for women, particularly young rural mothers experiencing the "cultural strain" of traditional gender role expectations, economic necessities of working outside the home, and "directives from extended family patriarchs and matriarchs." One woman said social workers in rural areas should "be prepared to deal with patriarchy ... but don't forget the power of rural women."

Focus group participants also defined political activism as a critical component of ongoing social work generalist practice. When discussing the need for social workers to "sharpen their political advocacy skills," several said, "We've abandoned our roles ... we narrowly define that role clinically ... we're so drawn for the individual needs.... I fight it in myself all the time.... It's seductive, you know." Participants gave examples of social policies that posed particular hardships for people in rural areas such as airline deregulation ("Smaller airports get fewer services."); TANF

reform workfare provisions (“Lack of rural public transportation and geographic distances aren’t addressed.”); and managed health care (“Access to rural health care services are extremely limited already.”). One person summarized, “You need to get out there and fight for your community.”

Discussion and Summary

This exploratory study gathered data from two focus groups of rural social work practitioners to answer the primary research question, “What are your suggestions for engaging in effective social work practice?” Participants revealed a passion for rural social work practice.

We have the critical skills that this society needs right now ... everywhere I look I see social workers; they’re the heart of some chain. They may not be the person standing outside making a speech, but they’re the person running the meeting. They’re making things happen. We are making things happen.

The focus group participants provided a glimpse into rural communities in the social environment and rural social work practice. They described people in rural areas as complex, with myriad ties to unique cultures and greater social and economic environment influences. For example, they portrayed rural people as simultaneously isolated and connected; self-reliant and recipients of mutual aid; and slow to change, while dynamically changing. This appeared to be consistent with an understanding of complex human behavior.

This participant-guided viewing opportunity also portrayed rural social work practice as complex, challenging, and rewarding. The data generated a plethora of practical suggestions for social workers in rural areas. Within the main theme of community, participants encouraged social workers to engage in ongoing community practice; expect poverty and scarce resources; use informal community resources; and adjust to slower community pace or change. Within the theme of connections, they advised social workers to understand nearly everything is connected; manage intersecting roles; use relationships to affect change; and span geographic distances and professional isolation. Within the theme of generalist practice, participants said social workers should use generalist practice skills; identify rural practice rewards and challenges; be flexible, creative, and innovative; and advocate for more rural practice content in social work education. Following the theme of diversity, participants suggested that social workers use cultural competency skills; seek insider status; identify impacts of rural stigma; and advocate for social justice in rural areas.

Despite numerous calls for flexibility and innovation within social work practice in rural areas, participants were nearly silent in recommending increased research on social work practice. Practice in rural areas would logically bene-

fit from testing innovative interventions and building on the formative state of knowledge development. The lack of discussion about the need for increased research with stronger research designs seemed like an omission, since more research is clearly needed.

Limitations of the study include self-report data not verified by observation of actual practice, no input from rural consumers, and, most critically, a small, self-selected sample. Findings generated from data drawn from a small sample of participants at a rural social work conference cannot be generalized to the greater population of all social workers working and living in rural areas.

The main strength of this exploratory study was the genuine attempt to build on the emerging empirical base of knowledge about rural social work practice. Perhaps the illustrative Jane Smith, and other social workers living and working in rural areas, will find the participants’ shared practice wisdom useful to enhance their professional endeavors with some of the millions of people living across the vast American terrain.

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