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Engaging Local Government through Neighborhoods and Communities

In today's policy environment, social workers need to be engaged in their local governments. The devolution of power from the federal government to the state and local levels of government continues to provide opportunities for social workers to engage in policy practice at the state and local levels (Hoefer, 2012; Jansson, 2014; Linhorst, 2002; Reisch, 2000; Rocha, Poe, and Thomas, 2010; and Rose, 1999). However, the policy practice literature has not identified these additional opportunities—especially at the local level of government. Skills and skill-development, political activities and behaviors, classroom assignments, and policy research are either focused on the federal or state levels or they are presented to be more broadly applied across federal, state, and local levels.

Recent studies have explored opportunities for social worker involvement in local politics as local policy advocates and as local elected officials. Sather, Weitz, and Carlson (2007), working with a local housing agency, incorporate municipal-level, community-oriented service learning projects for social work students to focus on local housing solutions and services to local homeless populations. In their study of social workers in elected office, Lane & Humphreys (2011) found that the largest group of respondents (69%) had held office or were candidates at the local level and that social workers were most likely to run for office on the city, town, or county council. Also, the social workers surveyed were most likely to be elected when running for local office, such as school board (87%) and city/town/county councils (77%). In fact, Ritter (2007) found that interest in local politics was a significant predictor of licensed social workers' political participation, suggesting that it may be easier, and less intimidating, to participate politically at the local level.

Rose (1999) argues that local politics should be attractive to social workers because local government focuses on local issues that directly impact the community such as roads, sewers, garbage collection, traffic, police and fire protection. Engaging in local government can improve the quality of life within a community, and this may encourage and inspire social workers to get involved in the communities in which they live or work. Because local government is far more accessible and tangible than state governments or the federal government, identifying policy practice opportunities for social workers at the local level can be key to encouraging more social workers to engage in policy practice at the local government level.

Engaging Local Government through Policy Practice Activities

Accessing local government is much easier than accessing the county, state, or federal government because our local government is located right where we live and work. As a local elected official for over eight years in the City of Artesia, California, I have identified and organized the following activities to facilitate access to local government. We can access it directly or indirectly, through engaging and participating in local activities and organizations within and across three settings: neighborhood, community/institution, and local government.

Neighborhood. Social Workers can engage elected officials and staff by engaging their neighbors in their own neighborhood. For example, one of my graduate students in my community organizing course talked to her neighbors in her apartment complex about their concerns and found that her neighbors shared her concern about burglaries in the neighborhood and that they want to do something about it. I suggested that she contact her city government to find out how she and her neighbors could create a neighborhood watch. She contacted the city staff member, who has committed to working with her to create a neighborhood watch. Through engaging her neighbors and gaining their support, she was empowered to contact the city directly

to address their concerns. When the neighborhood watch is created, they will be interacting with their local law enforcement officials to receive regular updates on crime within their neighborhood and suggestions on what the neighbors can do to be more proactive in preventing crime. As an organized group with a shared interest in public safety, they can build upon their power move forward to engage their elected officials and petition their local government to provide necessary resources and solutions to address their public safety concerns.

We can also engage local government officials and staff in more informal activities or events in our neighborhoods. Many times local government officials and staff will be invited to attend a neighborhood block party, a neighborhood watch meeting, or another similar neighborhood meeting/event, where we can meet them to build professional relationships with them.

Community/institution. In this setting, interested social workers can engage with local government through community-based organizations, clubs, or associations. For example, a new executive director from a local human service agency came to our city council meeting to introduce herself to the council. Since I had not had the opportunity to interact with this agency before, I made an appointment to meet with her. As a result of our meeting, we have engaged with her agency to provide the city with a proposal to provide senior services to our growing and diverse elderly population in our city. Our city contracts with a variety of public and private organizations to provide services to our constituents, and this may develop into a mutually-beneficial partnership in the future. Social workers who are employed by or volunteer for human service organizations can engage local government directly in this way.

Social workers can also meet elected officials and staff at fundraisers for local nonprofit organizations, chambers of commerce meetings, “ribbon cutting” ceremonies for new businesses,

or meetings of local groups, such as Rotary, Lions, or Women's Club. With the consent of their employers, social workers can organize meetings for the community to discuss issues of concern within the neighborhood, invite local elected officials to visit their agency or other community-based human service agencies, or they can represent their agencies at community meetings. In these ways, social workers can very easily be engaging local government through their agencies, groups, or organizations.

Local Government. Social workers can engage local government directly. While it is difficult to interact with elected officials and their staff at a formal council meeting, we can attend local government "town hall" meetings; receptions for visiting dignitaries or newly elected officials; local government-sponsored events, such as job fairs, health fairs, 4th of July celebrations, or pancake breakfast fundraisers for the youth baseball teams; or meetings of the Parent Teacher Association at a local school or in the school district. Of course, we can create relationships directly with local government officials and staff, discuss local issues of concern with local government officials and staff, seek appointment to local government committees or commissions, or run for elected office.

As part of an undergraduate policy practice assignment, one of my students decided to schedule an appointment to meet with her city council representative's staff to express her concern about the lack of lighting at a local park. When my student described the issue to the staff member, the staff member told her that their office was also looking at addressing lighting issues at another local park nearby. The staff member contacted the city's Department of Parks and Recreation to study the situation, and the department found that this park also needed additional lighting. The council staff member told my student that the Department would determine whether there is adequate funding in its current fiscal year budget to install the new

lights at the park. My student was amazed at how relatively “easy” it was for her to engage with her local government on a local issue of concern. Now, with an established relationship with her local council staff, she can keep the staff member accountable to her and to her constituents by following through on installing the new park lights. Many of my students have engaged their local elected officials in this way, and these officials have become a primary contact for these students in their own communities to work on addressing areas of concern in their neighborhoods.

Across these neighborhood, community/institution, and local government settings, social workers can establish professional relationships with individuals, groups, and organizations to improve the quality of life in the communities in which they live and work. My social work students, constituents, neighbors, business owners, city staff, and local elected officials all want the same things in their own communities: effective law enforcement and fire protection; well-functioning infrastructure, such as street lights, sidewalks, and roads; adequate park space and recreational activities; regular trash disposal and street cleaning; access to public transportation, good public schools, and shopping; and much more. As social workers build and expand their professional connections in their communities, they can utilize community organizing and policy practice skills and interventions to empower residents to engage local governments to express their priorities for their own communities and to impact the local policy making process.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Education

It is hoped that these local policy practice opportunities will facilitate social workers’ involvement in local government and provide ideas for curriculum changes in social work programs. For professional social workers and their employers, these activities signify opportunities to introduce social workers and human service agencies to their neighborhoods,

communities, and local governments. By devoting time to these local activities, we can develop a world of goodwill and trust within their neighborhoods, communities, and local governments.

Since social work programs are intimate partners with their communities, educators can help increase policy practice by developing ways to incorporate local activities into their curricula. For policy practice courses, some of these activities can be employed as assignments for students to introduce them to the issues in their neighborhoods and communities as a precursor to more advanced policy practice and community organizing courses. Participating in these activities can support social work students' professional development through networking with their neighbors, community-based organizations, and local governments. Fieldwork outcomes can be developed to promote local policy practice for students and their fieldwork internship agencies.

Social Workers can become positive role models in their own neighborhoods and communities by engaging in these local policy activities. In discussing issues of concern with neighbors informally, participating in community-based and faith-based groups, service clubs, organizations, and their activities, and representing their agencies at community events and local government meetings, social workers will be seen by the community as leaders. It is hoped that by identifying these local activities that social workers will be encouraged to move beyond passive political activities, such as voting, knowing their legislators, and reading the news, to engage their local governments to improve the quality of life for themselves and their clients in their own neighborhoods and communities.

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