

POSITIONS IN SOCIAL WORK

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Positions in Social Work by Edward T. Devine & Mary Van Kleeck

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A STUDY OF THE NUMBER, SALARIES, EXPERIENCE AND QUALIFICATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL WORKERS IN UNOFFICIAL SOCIAL AGENCIES IN NEW YORK CITY, BASED UPON AN INVESTIGATION MADE BY FLORENCE WOOLSTON FOR THE NEW YORK SCHOOL OF PHILANTHROPY AND THE INTERCOLLEGIATE BUREAU OF OCCUPATIONS

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INTRODUCTION
A PROFESSION IN THE MAKING

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The social spirit in America has expressed itself variously as organized charity, housing and public health movements, settlements, municipal and social research, experiments with new criminal procedure and prison reform, playgrounds and recreation centers, religious and medical social service, industrial commissions and public welfare departments. These diversified and yet, in essential aim and motive, closely allied activities, have given rise to a new vocation, to a profession in the making. This calling, from the very nature of the work to be done in it, and from the character of its leaders, makes an extraordinary appeal to the missionary spirit of the young men and women in and out of the universities who have seen the vision of a new social order in which poverty, crime and disease, if not wholly abolished, will certainly be vastly diminished, and will not exist, at any rate, as the result of social neglect, as the result of bad traditions which enlightenment can end, or of obsolete institutions which the laws can change.

These allied activities of the new social reform have caught up and, as it were, assimilated many of the old-established agencies for relieving individual distress and misfortune. The hospital is no longer merely a refuge for the sick but also a health center. From it radiate prevention and educational influences as important as the bedside ministrations to the sick. The orphan asylum is no longer a place to keep a few orphans alive, but a child-welfare station, in which the whole problem of organizing the educational, moral, economic and recreational life of the child may be studied, in some respects even better than in the necessarily more complex normal home life. The relief society is no longer solely to supply food and fuel and clothing to the "worthy poor," but is to improve their condition, to re-establish their earning capacity and independence. For these reasons, the men and women who are employed in relief societies, children's institutions, and hospitals find themselves wholly akin to

the social workers who are securing new housing and compensation laws, promoting instructive nursing and medical inspection, or revising a discredited penal system. A few of the older agencies and a few that are mediæval in spirit, even if recently founded, have been left behind in this new alignment of social forces, but speaking generally it is certainly true that the so-called charitable activities of the country are faced in the forward direction; that their desire is not merely to help individuals, but to improve the conditions of life; that they think of themselves as social, educational and preventive agencies, and would have no sympathy with but only abhorrence for the notion that it is desirable to maintain a class of "deserving poor" in order that there may be some one on whom to lavish our bounty.

The change is revolutionary and complete. Almost as a matter of course workers in philanthropic activities now sympathize with wage-earners in all lawful, and perhaps in some technically unlawful, attempts to improve their condition. They recognize the absolute necessity of protecting and whenever possible raising general standards of living. They oppose child labor and a seven-day week. They are apt to go beyond labor unions themselves in favoring minimum wage laws. They have worked for compensation legislation and are getting ready for sickness and old age insurance. The very tasks in which they are engaged compel a generous sympathy with all who suffer from bad social conditions and a righteous indignation against those who profit from social injustice and inequitable laws, customs and prejudices. The things which social workers do in common; their difficulties, obstacles, and discouragements; their purposes, ideals and achievements, unite them in a common family in spite of great differences in their training and education, in their specific duties, in their relations with their respective employers, in the extent to which they have independent professional responsibility on their own shoulders, in the permanence of their tenure and even in the compensation for similar service.

Such a consciousness of common interests has usually come in the past either through some quasi-legal monopoly such as exists in the practice of law and medicine, or through a class guild or trade union movement. Social work has no protection of academic, professional degree, or public examination, and it has no union or association to protect the economic interests of its members. What improvements have been made in salaries, in

professional training, and in the conditions of the work,—and progress in all these directions has been very substantial—have been due mainly to the efforts of directors and officers of the social agencies, to their natural and mainly unconscious competition with one another, and to the independent development of professional education in this field in or in affiliation with the universities.

The time has come when social workers themselves, not through trade union or monopoly methods, but through methods now considered appropriate and rational in other professions, may advantageously give more attention to the question of thorough preparation for their chosen career. As a contribution to an understanding of the present situation the Intercollegiate Bureau of Occupations and the School of Philanthropy have made this study of present positions in social work in New York City. From the organizations and from individual social workers the facts have been gleaned in regard to salaries, education and training, length of service and duties of those who are employed in the voluntary social agencies. Not including here any who are engaged in the public service,—although those who are engaged in social welfare departments should, of course, be included in any complete survey—there are some four thousand men and women so employed. Many of them receive exceedingly small salaries, and many of them, not always necessarily the same ones, have so little general education, and so little special training, that their presence can be accounted for only by the absence of effective competition or by very low standards in their employers. In many instances the societies could well afford to increase salaries if competent and expert workers could then be found to accept them. With improved service they could raise a larger budget far more easily than they can secure their present income with the quality of service which they are in position to render. It is evident that not highly trained specialists in a hundred different specialized fields, but thoroughly trained experts in the broader aspects of social work are most in demand and that as such available experts increase in number, some of those now employed must necessarily give way. This is in the public interest and especially in the interest of those who need relief or service and for whose sake the agencies came into existence. As the requirements of social work are raised, professional training becomes more necessary and salaries must be

correspondingly increased to cover this cost of preparation. This is just what is taking place.

The professional school not only serves those who enter it, by giving them a grounding in the principles, methods and history of social work; it serves also by a selective process the agencies which engage social workers. There are those who are especially fitted for social work. It is a part of the task of the professional school to discover such persons and to persuade them to enter it. There are others who, whatever their gifts and fitness for other occupations, are not fitted for social work. It is the part of the professional school to help them at an early stage to discover their limitations and thus to save a waste of their time and resources, while saving the social agencies a needless disappointment. The school will not be infallible in this process and the way will always be open for persistent candidates to find their own opportunity for a demonstration of what they can do. The school, however, will naturally be on the eager search for all promising men and women and will have its greatest satisfaction in the discovery and development of those who "to natural ability and talents" add "the systematic training and theoretical knowledge to be gained from education," so that "there results a personality of unusual force and value."^{*}

The School of Philanthropy and the Intercollegiate Bureau undertook this inquiry in the first instance because of its obvious value in planning and carrying forward their own work. The results are made public in return for the courteous co-operation received from the social agencies and social workers, and because all directors and officers of the social agencies and all social workers have a direct interest in the situation which the inquiry discloses.

Ignorant, incompetent and untrained employes of social agencies should be gradually, and not too gradually, displaced by trained and capable workers. Those already at work who are not too old to learn and who are capable of learning should be encouraged to take special extension courses at a school for training social workers or elsewhere. Executives who are responsible for engaging the staff should get out of their heads the dreary platitudes about "personality" and "natural gifts," and co-operate with the universities and training schools in uniting "ability and talents" to "systematic training." Boards of

^{*} Cicero.