

COMMENTARY

The History of the National Organization of Forensic Social Work

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The National Organization of Forensic Social Work (NOFSW) has a long and vibrant history. As indicated in the Bylaws, the objective of NOFSW is the advancement of the practice and education of forensic social work including, but not limited to, the development and delivery of courses of instruction in the area of social work and the law, the development of standards of practice, and the promotion and publication of research all for the purpose of improving and developing the capabilities of its membership, as well as informing the public regarding forensic social workers. This is a brief commentary on the establishment of the organization.

In 1982, two forensic examiners, as designated by the State of Michigan, wondered if there was a similar job description for clinicians and/or social workers in other states. These certified forensic clinicians, Barbara O'Neal and Dane Hughes from the Department of Social Work at the Center for Forensic Psychiatry in Ann Arbor, decided to examine forensic social work practice throughout the United States and Puerto Rico (Hughes & O'Neal, 1983).

They constructed a questionnaire based in part on the work being done by forensic psychologists and then surveyed all the centers of forensic psychiatry listed in the Academy of Psychiatry and in law journals. Once follow-up letters were sent, they received responses from 340 practitioners (an 85% response rate).

The results of the survey indicated that forensic social work was being done far more often than reported on both an inpatient and outpatient basis.

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In fact, the majority of the respondents worked in inpatient settings and the sampling strategy likely missed an even larger number of forensic practitioners working in outpatient settings. Generally, most forensic social workers were making recommendations to the court and therefore did not have ultimate responsibility for decisions about competency, dispositions, or guilt. Hughes and O'Neal (1983) stated that,

The defense of a professional opinion drawn from the combined areas of legal and mental health expertise requires a substantial understanding not only of the nature and diagnosis of mental disorders but also of the content and intent of the applicable laws. Such understanding comes usually not from a general social work education but rather from specific training as an expert witness and as a forensic mental health professional. However, less than 25 percent of the respondents in the survey said that their institution provided training for the role of expert witness. Such training must, from the authors' experience, deal with issues of what to present. Without a proper preparation in technique, even a witness with a well-considered opinion can be made to look foolish by a lawyer who is skillful at the tricks of examination. (p. 394)

Even though not all respondents answered all questions, of those who responded and who worked at centers of forensic psychiatry:

- Just over 50% of the respondents said that their agencies supplied specialized training on the issue of competence to stand trial.
- Over 75% of forensic social workers were team leaders of teams that treated clients for that purpose.
- Over 45% of the agencies required a master's degree in social work and 14% required a BA or BSW, and less than 25% required an MA or some other degree.
- 40% of the responding states (20 states) said that a social worker did not need a master's degree to testify about a defendant's competence to stand trial, but 22% (11 states) required an MSW.

Conclusions from an informal survey such as this one are inherently limited. Furthermore, the respondents tended to be representative only of institutional social workers. However, because the survey indicated that a considerable number of social workers in the United States were practicing forensic social work, Hughes and O'Neal (1983) discussed the possibility of forming an organization for the purpose of qualifying the term and elements of "forensic social work," developing appropriate training, and creating a network with clinicians from other states.

With much discussion and planning, Hughes and O'Neal incorporated the National Organization of Forensic Social Work in Ann Arbor, Michigan

in 1983. In designing the NOFSW logo, they chose a tree in a circle as a symbol of reaching out to others while staying connected. Social workers and clinicians from the 50 surveyed institutions were invited to the first general meeting held in 1984 in Ann Arbor with 15 members in attendance. With the help of various founding members, a set of bylaws were drafted to delineate the administrative structure of the organization and a Code of Ethics was established. Over the next 28 years, the organization has evolved into the primary organization for practitioners of forensic social work. NOFSW continues to enhance the professional activities of forensic practitioners, administrators, researchers, and policy makers by providing an annual conference, a quarterly newsletter, and now the *Journal of Forensic Social Work*. In 2010, NOFSW performed an audit of its current operation and management. A strategic plan was developed to further improve services to its members. NOFSW remains a strong and viable membership organization and plans to celebrate its 30th anniversary in Michigan in 2013.

We would like to honor and acknowledge the presidents of NOFSW and thank them for their vision and commitment to the organization. Without these leaders and their selfless work to improve and standardize forensic social work, the organization surely couldn't have flourished for nearly three decades. Without NOFSW, thousands of forensic practitioners would still be searching for a professional identity and cobbling together training and practice standards. On behalf of current and future forensic practitioners, and the clients we serve, thank you.

PRESIDENTS OF THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF FORENSIC SOCIAL WORKERS

1984–1985	1	Dane Hughes
1985–1986	2	Barbara C. O'Neal
1986–1987	3	Richard Suehrstedt
1987–1988	4	Janet Warren
1988–1989	5	Deborah C. Scott
1989–1990	6	Daniel Janey
1990–1991	7	Frederic L. Pavelka
1991–1992	8	Howard Sovronsky
1992–1993	9	Frances Agatino
1993–1994	10	Janet Ades
1994–1995	11	Guay Chatfield
1995–1996	12	Mark Delaney
1996–1997	13	Donald R. Rilla
1997–1998	14	Anne Chambers
1998–1999	15	Daniel Mosley

1999–2000	16	M. James Toner
2000–2001	17	Ira Neighbors
2001–2002	18	Marilyn SmithCotterell
2002–2003	19	Karen van Beyer
2003–2004	20	William A. Holt
2004–2005	21	Katie Heffernan
2005–2006	22	Lyndia GreenFaust
2006–2008	23	William A. Holt
2008–2010	24	Stacey HardyDesmond
2010–2012	25	Suzanne Dowling

REFERENCE

- Hughes, D., & O'Neal, B. (1983). A survey of current forensic social work. *Social Work, 28*, 393–394.