



Guest Editorial

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Biography Statement:

Sky Westerlund has been the Executive Director of the Kansas Chapter, National Association of Social Workers for more than twenty years. Prior to that, she worked in child welfare and with at-risk adolescents.

Department of Children and Family Secretary Phyllis Gilmore is wrong to suggest lowering the qualifications to become a licensed social worker in the state of Kansas. She is attempting to distract the legislature and the public from the systemic problems that are plaguing the government agency charged with protecting children from harm. Her agency and the contractors' rapid social worker turnover results in a destabilized, crisis-oriented service delivery system that struggles to keep up with the needs of children and their families. It is a system problem. It is not a social worker qualifications problem.

First and foremost, the Kansas Chapter, National Association of Social Workers (KNASW) commends the frontline social workers who work in child welfare. It is extremely difficult and emotional to work with families in which the safety of a child is at stake. The work is time-consuming, complicated and compounded by the lack of services and supports that parents need to take care of their children. Too many Kansas families are in serious crisis. The number of children in state custody has skyrocketed to unprecedented numbers. Social workers work diligently in a system that fast tracks them to professional burnout. Child welfare is just one of many work opportunities for social workers.

In 1997, the year the state finished privatizing child welfare services, KNASW testified to the Kansas legislature about the high social worker turnover and unrealistic caseloads.

Not much has changed. Last year, the chapter testified that children in the secretary's care are outlasting their social workers. The most crucial element of a strong child welfare system is the long term tenure of social workers who are making critical assessments and recommendations to the court. It is challenging for families to gain stability with constant staff changes.

Contrary to Secretary Gilmore's comment, increasing numbers of students are pursuing a career in social work. There is robust enrollment in the eight schools of social work. The Behavioral Sciences Regulatory Board, which licenses social workers, reports there are over 7,400 licensed social workers. The board licensed 569 new social workers in 2016. The primary qualification to become a social worker is a degree in social work from a Council of Social Work Education accredited school. The curriculum is defined by these national standards to assure continuity of the profession across the country. Over forty years ago, Kansas was one of the first states to license social workers because it was understood how social work profoundly affects the lives of people. State licensure protects the public by ensuring basic qualifications and establishing recourse for misconduct.

Instead of dismissing social work standards and damaging public protection, attention and energy would be better spent in improving the overall working conditions of the child welfare system. For starters:

- Champion the social work profession
- Keep the workload realistic and achievable
- Provide ample supervision, support and professional development
- Restore the career ladder for social workers
- Pursue student loan forgiveness for social workers in child welfare
- Take advantage of the federal Title IVE Child Welfare stipend program
- Make the pay at the high end of competitive

Considering a reduction of basic qualifications for social work licensure is a giant step backwards that will not serve the needs of children and families.