

Social Service and Social Change in Action: Reflections on a Community-Based Program Evaluation

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For completion of the Bachelor of Arts in Social Welfare (BASW) Program at the University of Washington School of Social Work, students are required to complete a supervised practicum experience consisting of 480 hours (16+ hours per week) at a social services agency during their senior year (University of Washington School of Social Work 2014a). Under the supervision of an approved practicum instructor, the BASW Practicum provides students the opportunity to apply social welfare theory and classroom lessons in the community, gain professional experience, and develop the Core Competencies and Practice Behaviors set forth by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (University of Washington School of Social Work 2014b). The following narrative is a reflection of the time I spent at my practicum site, where I conducted a program evaluation that not only improved the lives of my clients but also served as the culmination of my educational and practicum service experiences.

I completed my practicum experience at the National Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society, Greater Northwest Chapter. What initially drew me to the National MS Society was its mission to “mobilize people and resources to drive research for a cure and address the challenges of everyone affected by MS” (National Multiple Sclerosis Society 2014). Envisioning “a world free from MS” (National Multiple Sclerosis Society 2014), I embarked on my practicum experience as a Programs and Services Social Work Intern. In this role, I contributed to the mission and vision of the National MS Society by performing a variety of functions. Once oriented to the organization and sufficiently trained, I facilitated the engagement of MS Scholars, which is a program where college students receive scholarships from the National MS Society. I also recruited new volunteers and MS ambassadors to promote awareness of MS within their communities. In addition to deepening the engagement of community members, I worked within the Financial Assistance Program to help people living with MS and their families gain access to financial resources. I accomplished this by connecting clients to community organizations and leveraging funding with the National MS Society. By identifying clients’ needs, strengths, and resources, I engaged in empowerment practices and encouraged clients to be their own best advocates. Being able to contribute to people living with MS obtaining durable medical equipment, affording their housing and utilities, and participating in wellness activities made for an incredibly rewarding practicum experience.

With the Financial Assistance Program as my primary focus, I embarked on a program evaluation of its impact on clients accessing resources. My rationale for embarking on the program evaluation was threefold. First, understanding the impact of the program on clients would allow for grant writers to gain more funding for the program. Second, it would serve as a bottom-up approach to inform program improvements and expansion. This means the clients themselves would be the ones informing improvements to the program. Third, it would intensify the academic rigor of my senior year in the BASW Program and give me valuable experience conducting practice-based research, one of the ethical obligations of professional social workers.

I approached my first program evaluation the same way I would approach building a house. I started with a strong foundation of personal commitment to community service and social justice. I accessed tools gained from my education in the University of Washington

BASW Program. I applied my knowledge of social welfare theory to better understand the lives of my clients and consistently compared those theories to my experiences. My knowledge of research methods was applied to develop surveys, conduct interviews, manage and analyze data, and present research findings. I directed my background in biology and human behavior in the social environment toward understanding the physiology of MS and how the environment can impact the health of my clients. I used my expertise in intergroup dialogue to deeply engage with clients, understand how their experiences are informed by societal structures, and help them plan for action.

An additional tool I accessed during the implementation of the program evaluation was support from supervisors at the National MS Society and faculty at the University of Washington. I consulted with my practicum instructor at the National MS Society on a weekly basis to apprise her of my progress on the program evaluation and seek advice. The MS Navigators at the Greater Northwest Chapter were available for ongoing support. They clarified all the nuanced details of the Financial Assistance Program and its policies. I spoke with professors about survey design and the necessity of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for my proposed study. I then consulted the IRB for guidance and exemption for the program evaluation.

With my strong foundation and tools gained from my educational experiences and consultation with experts, I was able to lay the building blocks to a successful program evaluation. The first building block was designing the questionnaire. My practicum instructor provided the Financial Assistance Program evaluation survey that had been used in previous years as a template for my evaluation. I was told that the survey as it existed did not sufficiently evaluate its impact on clients. Therefore, I modified the original survey to include open-ended questions about the effects of accessing the Financial Assistance Program on clients and their families. I additionally added a final open-ended question where clients had the opportunity to identify gaps in community resources, intended to inform policy change efforts. Once the survey was designed and data collection and management had been established, a pilot study was conducted.

During the pilot study, I initially designed a web survey and emailed it to clients who had received financial assistance within the fiscal year. I thought that allowing clients to respond anonymously over the Internet would minimize any interviewer effects that could arise if I had conducted the survey over the phone. One concern I had in conducting the program evaluation via web-based surveys was that I would lose direct contact with my clients. There were additional problems that arose when conducting the program evaluation over web-based surveys. Although the information collected through the web-based questionnaire was useful for evaluating the impact of the program, it was impersonal and did not include the perspectives of clients who did not have access to the Internet. In addition to being classist with regard to requiring access to the Internet in order to participate in the survey, it was also an ableist approach in assuming clients living with MS could physically and cognitively complete the survey without assistance. The emailed program evaluation surveys therefore had a low response rate and missed key members of the population the Financial Assistance Program at the National MS Society served. With a commitment to be more responsive to the needs of the population, I modified the delivery of the program evaluation.

The decision to include telephone interviews as an additional survey modality proved to be a powerful tool for engagement with clients. In conducting the surveys via telephone, I deepened my understanding of the importance of revisiting previous work with clients. This

allowed us to identify additional needs of clients and connect them with resources to meet those needs. Some clients, for example, requested they be connected with support groups in their neighborhoods. In one instance, there was not a support group in the client's area, and the client agreed to start and facilitate her own support group. In providing information about how the client could start and lead her own support group, I indirectly acted as a community organizer. Because summer was approaching and MS symptoms are exacerbated by hot weather, clients also expressed needs for cooling vests and air conditioners, which I helped them obtain. One client inquired about leveraging resources with another community agency to help him obtain a scooter that would allow him to be more mobile. I am pleased to report that the process of obtaining the durable medical equipment for this client is now complete. Some clients found themselves in need of social and emotional support but expressed they had resisted calling the National MS Society because they had already received so much help from the organization in the past. These clients were thus relieved when I called to complete the Financial Assistance Program evaluation survey with them. I was then able to connect them with staff they had established positive relationships with in the past to provide them the socio-emotional support they needed. These examples show how conducting a community-based program evaluation improved the lives of clients while enhancing my experientially-derived tools and developing my social work praxis.

The program evaluation was a truly integrative project that encompassed my learning in the classroom and the community as well as my personal and professional commitments to individual and collective well-being. While bridging classroom learning and civic engagement to serve my clients, I was able to conduct an evaluation that will inform the improvement and expansion of the National MS Society, Greater Northwest Chapter Financial Assistance Program. The dual missions of social work are social service and social change, and I am pleased to say the program evaluation accomplished both missions simultaneously.

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