NABSW Position Paper on Licensure 1983
Excerpt from Righteous Self Determination: The Black Social Work Movement in America, Dr. Patricia Reid Merritt, 2010.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The licensing of social work establishes an elitist hierarchy within the social work profession which has the long-term implication of significantly changing the racial structure of the human service job market, the kind of quality of service available to the Black consumer, the number of Black service delivery agencies, and the allocation of resources.

In addition, licensing of social work is deceptive as it purports to protect the public and insure quality service, when in fact it merely serves to falsely legitimize professional status and assure qualification for third party reimbursement.

Social work licensure is worker's protection, not consumer protection

POSITION STATEMENT

The National Association of Black Social Workers is opposed to any system to license social workers. While NABSW is in full support of standards and quality service and will advocate for such, it realizes the true motivation for licensure is not protection of the public and assurance of quality service. And, unless consumer protection is the issue, then government regulation of the profession is inappropriate.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A total of 25 states have some form of legal regulation of social work. Of these 25 states, 16 have acts licensing the practice of social work. A survey of these states reveals that "very little punitive action has been taken in response to complaints" filed against social work practitioners. According to data from the Complaint Analysis Division of the Department of Regulation of one state, only 52 complaints have been received in the seven years of regulations. Among the 52 complaints, only one (1) was for alleged incompetence, and the charge was dismissed.

Several explanations may be put forth to explain these findings. One explanation might be the complaint system available to the consumer is ineffective; a second explanation is little discernible abuse is occurring in the practice of social work. A more reasonable explanation is the efficacy of social work
regulations to protect the consumer is highly questionable. A review of the literature provided substance to this latter explanation.

Literature which surveyed the outcomes of treatment by trained and untrained individuals revealed the following conclusion: No clear risk to the public from "unqualified" practitioners was identified; academic credentials are not in and of themselves a guarantee of competence. Interpersonal skills of empathy, ability to handle conflict and warmth are at least as critical as technical knowledge and skills.

In addition, leaders of many professions, social work included, admit that a real motivation for licensure is to enhance the status of the individual in the professions, such as: (1) assure receipt of third party reimbursement, and (2) enhance professional status of acquiring governmental sanction.

It is NABSW's position that the primary benefit of licensure has been to qualify for third party reimbursement for the less than 10% of social workers practicing in the private fee-for-service sector. However, this primary benefit is not in itself sufficient to warrant government regulations of the profession. The potential harm to the traditional social work constituency is far greater than the benefit licensure would bring to these few professionals in their new constituency, the private fee-for-service sector.

Finally, NABSW believes that social work is a helping profession that poses no danger to the public as accredited schools of social work are graduating competent, qualified social workers to provide social work service.

**STRATEGIES**

The National Association of Black Social Workers recommends several strategies to stop continued efforts to license social work: (1) conduct studies in states requiring regulation to further support NABSW's position; (2) take a visible stance on licensing (know what proponents of licensure are doing). Study the issue, develop factual data, publicly debate proponents of licensing. Remember the preamble of any licensure bill is protection of the public. This is pivotal in the challenge: destroy this deception and the weapon is destroyed; (3) contact all Black media (and white) and publicize the licensing issue; (4) establish political and social networks with elected officials and gain support and sentiment for NABSW's positions; (5) gather data on other licensed professions such as the medical profession, psychiatry, and psychology to demonstrate the minute success licensing has yielded in protecting the public; (6) study the cost of licensing in your state. Tackle the cost issue of a system that does not accomplish its purpose, consumer protection; (7) have NABSW members serve on the Board of Licensing and Regulations.