

THE ODD COUPLE?

Social Work and Politics in North Carolina



**NORTH CAROLINA SOCIAL WORKERS
IN ELECTED OFFICE, LOBBYISTS AND ADVOCATES**

 **N A S W** NORTH CAROLINA CHAPTER

National Association of Social Workers

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Foreword

A Letter from the desk of Kathy Boyd, the Executive Director of NASW-NC from 1986-2018.

Despite the clever title, social work and politics really isn't an odd couple at all but rather a comfortable companionship. I remember having a conversation with MaryAnn Black (profile on page 36) a long time ago. She let me know that a County Commissioner's biggest budget items and, therefore, biggest issues were related to education, Departments of Social Service, and Medicaid. These were all things that as a social worker, she was experienced and familiar with. She knew the clients and knew the frontline consequences and issues in a way that most people don't. To her it made perfect sense to be tackling these issues on a more macro level. Instead of working one-on-one with an individual Medicaid client she was focused on the Medicaid system and working to solve the system problems. The system will never change if we don't advocate for our clients on a macro level. As social workers, our educational background is unique. We see the individual as a part of a family, a system and a society. How can we not be involved in policies that impact that individual client? I challenge us as a profession and as individual social workers to step up to the plate and get involved at every level of practice.

- Kathy Boyd, ACSW, CMSW
Former NASW-NC Executive Director

"It's not a question of getting started. The start has been made. It's a question of what's to be done from now on."

~ **B. F. Skinner**

State Elected Officials

Sydney Batch, JD, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Current Elected Position: North Carolina Senate
District 17, Wake County

Previous Elected Position: North Carolina House of Representatives
District 37, 2019-2021



Motivation to seek elected office:

As a family law attorney and child welfare law advocate, Senator Batch has seen firsthand the challenges many families face. Through political advocacy, she has a platform to call attention to these issues and find legislative solutions. Too many families struggle day-to-day to make ends meet and our government has the opportunity to implement policies and laws that will allow all North Carolinians to live prosperous and purposeful lives.

“Too many families struggle day-to-day to make ends meet and our government has the opportunity to implement policies and laws that will allow all North Carolinians to live prosperous and purposeful lives.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Senator Batch’s background in social work is invaluable to her work as a legislator. She says she is able to understand people’s lived experiences and translate that into meaningful policy. She understands the importance of passing legislation that is evidenced-based and implementing policies that work for a variety of different people and groups.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Senator Batch thinks social workers are extremely well equipped to engage in the political process. She says social workers have the ability to research, review and critique policies and legislation from an evidence-based approach. Because of our training, Senator Batch believes social workers can create policies that benefit the masses and those in need, while also understanding how the legislation will impact the life of an individual. Given how interconnected so many of these issues are social work is more relevant than ever, she says.

Graig Meyer, MSW

Education: Master of Social Work, University of Chicago

Current Elected Position: North Carolina House of Representatives
District 50, Caswell and Orange Counties



Motivation to seek elected office:

Representative Meyer's interest in public service was sparked when he was a child. Both his parents were social workers and they fostered within him a passion for public service. Since moving to North Carolina, Representative Meyer has worked as a school district administrator for Chapel Hill-Carrboro Schools. Since observing the problematic education policy making model used by the North Carolina General Assembly, Representative Meyer contends, "Too many decisions by policy makers are made for the benefit of adults and not for the benefit of the children." Representative Meyer believes that the General Assembly needs more educators in office so that decisions on education policy are made by those who have actual experience with education. He made the decision to run for the District 50 appointment after a vacancy arose following the 2013 legislative session. He was appointed in October 2013 and looks forward to working on the intertwining issues of education and the economy.

"Social Work has an ethical duty to advocate for macro systems level change."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Representative Meyer says social work brings a unique perspective to the policy making table because of its theoretical and evidence-based foundation. Social workers see the ways policies and the implementation of policies directly and indirectly affect the daily lives of individuals in our state because they view issues and problems as interrelated components. Social work has a unique problem solving approach; we look for solutions that are not just a fix for an issue but attempt to prevent the issue from reoccurring or from creating further problems. Representative Meyer uses systems theory on a regular basis to assess everything from policies and their impacts on his constituents, to group dynamics in a legislative committee meeting. As a profession that seeks to meet clients where they are, social workers are also uniquely equipped to help bring many, often competing, interests to the table.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Social Work in its very essence is political. "Social Work has an ethical responsibility to advocate for macro systems level change. The individuals we serve in direct care are impacted by public and private systems." Representative Meyer finds that being involved in politics as a social worker is a fulfilling way to do "the most good for the largest number of people." If social workers do not advocate for social change then the client populations we serve will be repeatedly faced by the same problems and challenges. With their evidence-based approach to problem solving social workers have an in-depth understanding of the needs of individuals in the state, which helps make for responsible policy making. Representative Meyer's advice to all social workers is to "get political." Social Workers need to have a seat at the table.

County & Municipal Elected Officials

Alan Beck, BSW

Education: Bachelor of Social Work, Western Carolina University

Current Elected Position: Davidson County Board of Education, Chair



Motivation to seek elected office:

For Alan, motivation to run for a position on the Board of Education was personal, starting with his own three children, all in the public school system. However, Alan considers himself to have “20,000 kids”, as a result of his community engagement, and became very involved in the school system on behalf of “all” his children through tutoring, the Parent Teacher Student Association, and community sports. His commitment to the local public school system evident, several individuals urged Alan to run for a position on the Board of Education. Running against 12 others for a position, Alan’s obvious desire to “help the people of [his] community” assisted him in winning the election. For the past twelve years, Alan has served his community as a Board member. Having served as a Member at large and Vice Chair, Alan’s work and service on the Board of Education has helped “shape the landscape of the curricular and extracurricular activities of the school system.”

“You can stand on a stump and scream for change or work quietly behind the scenes to make change.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

In his work as an elected official in his local school system, Alan’s social work background has helped him realize “school is not just the classroom anymore; it’s the community.” This understanding, coupled with his training, helps him “identify community problems [he] can address through [his] position with the school Board.” Over the years, Alan has used his social work skills to identify many community needs and leverage his position as an elected official to meet those needs. During his tenure as a Board member Alan has helped increase the number of middle school sports available to students, hoping “middle school age kids will find a sense of structure and camaraderie”, and implemented the Learning Academy, a combination day care and tutorial service for his community. In addition to other services he has helped bring to his community, Alan’s social work skills, like self-reflection and awareness, have helped him identify his strengths and weaknesses, which he has “channeled into helping [his]community”, a task he is “totally dedicated to.”

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Alan believes “social workers should get involved in politics if they feel the calling.” He advises social workers not to become politically involved with a “chip on your shoulder or be driven by a single issue” but rather to remember that “politics is what you make of it,” calling social workers to be flexible in exploring opportunities for political action. Alan uses his political involvement as a means of “giving something positive back” to his community, where his political experiences have “humbled” him, as he has witnessed many positive changes unfold in his community as a result of his work as an elected official.

Jacqueline Gist, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Current Elected Position: Carrboro Town Council Member



Motivation to seek elected office:

Prior to being elected to the Carrboro Town Council in 1981, Jacquelyn had always been involved in her Carrboro community in a variety of ways and increased in graduate school. After graduation, Jacquelyn ran the shelter and served her community in additional ways through involvement with Friends of Old Carrboro, the Carrboro Board of Adjustment Committee, the local Democratic Party, and many other locally active organizations. This high level of community engagement garnered her much favor in her community, leading a group of local progressives to approach her to run for a position on the Town Council in 1981. She won the election and has been serving on the Board since. She recalls having opportunities to “do things directly, like helping intervene when a low-income, predominantly Hispanic apartment complex owner was harassing tenants and trying to force them out”, or “looking at ways to mitigate landfill effects on low-income communities.” However, she feels that most of her position is “not about the flashy stuff, it’s about the everyday details that make a community livable.”

“Apolitical social workers make no sense. More social workers in office means there is a greater chance of hearing the human side of things.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

In discussing her position as a Council Member through a social work lens, Jacquelyn states, “It’s the only lens I have,” speaking to the significance of social work presence in politics. Serving on the Council with a fellow social worker, she noted that social workers, “without even thinking about it, try to work collaboratively, build consensus, and look behind the surface and figure out what’s really being said.” Appreciative for the diversity, professional competence, and acumen of her fellow Council Members, she notes that social work is different from the other professions represented on the Council. Her position as Council Member with a social work background helps her ensure that she is able to spur dialogue about “what is fair to the person who actually has the quietest voice” in her community.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

The connection between social work and political involvement was clear to Jacquelyn. When considering the political climate in North Carolina, she asks “if social workers aren’t involved, who will be?” This question was put forward by her concern for the clients social workers serve, positing that political involvement is critical in making sure social workers continue to have the resources to serve their clients, or maintain employment. Jacquelyn encourages all social workers to “be involved, even if it’s in self-interest” and to be involved particularly at the local level, where what is occurring locally “has a direct impact on lives. Whether it’s the School Board, Town Council, or Advisory Boards—all of these need the social work perspective. You don’t have to be an elected official to get involved.”

Theresa Locklear, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Current Elected Position: Pembroke Town Council Member



Motivation to seek elected office:

Theresa identified a need for change that was present in the Town of Pembroke. Theresa discussed the lack of gender diversity on the Pembroke Town Council, "Pembroke Town Council members were men only and they had been on the Council for a number of years. I felt that being a social worker, a female and new comer to the council that I viewed policies differently. Instead of being for a small group of people, my vision was what would be best for the largest number of people in the town. In order to bring about my vision, I had to seek office, so I ran for Pembroke Town Council."

"Having Social Workers in political positions enables us to bring about change to our communities by implementing programs that will benefit the poor and middle class."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Theresa discussed her role in supporting the community and encouraging community activities as a social worker. Some of the activities she has helped to start are a yearly Easter egg Hunt, lighting of the Christmas trees in the Milton Hunt Park, a tea party for little girls, a 4th of July Bash at the Milton Hunt Park, a Spiritual Walk, and a monthly prayer in the Milton Hunt Park. Through her work as councilwoman, she has been able to develop and implement several programs in the Town of Pembroke. Theresa stated that as a social worker, she can "see the need to bring the community closer together by doing different types of activities that involve the community members." Theresa also spoke about her encouragement of the public to get involved in elections and the voting process. "During an election year I encourage others to take part in the voting process and educate people about candidates that are seeking office. I actively campaign for candidates of my choice."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Theresa believes that social workers should seek political involvement to make recommendations to bring about positive change related to policies. Theresa emphasizes the power social workers in political positions have to "implement programs that will benefit the poor and middle class." Theresa emphasized the crucial role that she plays in ensuring "that all people in my community have equal access to needed resources and opportunities they require to meet their basic needs." She proclaims this support of the community in accessing resources and opportunities to be one of the most important parts of being a social worker in a political role.

Paige Sayles, MSW

Master of Social Work, Florida State University

Current Elected Position: Franklin County Board of Education, Chair



Motivation to seek elected office:

Paige's political involvement began on a personal level, as she had four children in school and was concerned about school issues and how they could impact her children. To address her concerns, Paige began attending school Board meetings and found, at the time, the Board seemed "issue oriented" rather than focused on larger scale, school system health. Having found that she did not "like the Board's direction and felt they needed to think of all kids and all schools," she decided to run for a position on her local Board of Education. Paige perceived an injustice or inequality in her community and took action to become more directly involved in tackling school system issues. Since 1998, Paige has worked alongside fellow Board members in considering who needs help and how the Board can work together to meet those needs and enhance their community.

"Social work helps start action and keep discussions flowing."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Social work "affects everything" Paige does in her work as a member of the Board of Education. Her experience in both direct and macro practice allows her to "look at the whole picture" and consider how issues "will effect teachers, kids, and families." The prevalence of Systems Theory in her work helps her examine issues critically and use her "knowledge to help fellow board members understand systems and how change happens." Paige has also found that social work offers a grounding in solving problems, rather than being "reaction oriented or just complaining" about problems and issues that arise.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Based on her experiences with social work and political action, Paige is "surprised that more social workers aren't" politically involved. According to Paige, social work and politics are a "natural fit", but she recognizes that political involvement "may depend on what your strengths are." Paige's interests have tended towards macro level issues, but she feels persuaded that politically active individuals "have to be able to see big picture stuff" and overall, "if there were more of us [social workers] out there, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in now."

Summer Woodside, PhD

Bachelor of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

PhD, Specialized Education Services, UNC at Greensboro

Current Elected Position: Scotland County School Board Member



Motivation to seek elected office:

Dr. Woodside always saw herself doing micro practice and never imagined being involved with political advocacy but as a school social worker Dr. Woodside “became increasingly interested in how decisions made at the federal, state, and local levels of government affected my students and their families”. Dr. Woodside explained that there were times when “policy decisions did not reflect what we, as educators, felt was in the best of students” and that “once implemented the policies resulted in negative outcomes for students”. Dr. Woodside also mentioned ways that “policy decisions had the potential to negatively affect job satisfaction for educators”. Through conversations with state and local representatives, Dr. Woodside “began to realize that many of them did not realize all of the potential consequences of the policy decisions they were making”. Her passion to empower others through education and experiences in the school social work setting dealing with policies motivated her to run for the school board to be able to advocate for “education policies to be centered around the best interest of all students and educators”.

“Social workers bring with them skills in policy analysis and understand how to apply frameworks to evaluate if a policy is biased towards or against certain populations.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Dr. Woodside emphasized the ways social work skills used with clients are also important in advocacy efforts in the political arena. Social workers’ ability to establish rapport, ask open-ended questions, actively listen, and show empathy are key skills in developing relationships with stakeholders, constituents and the elected officials that social workers must work with. Dr. Woodside emphasized that social workers are trained as “collaborators, negotiators, and mediators” which “can be helpful in navigating the decision-making process”. Social workers maintain an ability to analyze policy and apply frameworks to examine potential biases that might exist in policies. Finally, Dr. Woodside highlights the important role of social work’s core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence in navigating the political arena. Our professional Code of Ethics provides social workers with a foundation for engaging in effective political practice and advocacy.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

“Dr. Woodside believes social workers should be involved in politics and noted similarities that exist between political practice/advocacy and micro social work. She continued to discuss commonalities between the two stating, “For example, the same rewarding feeling that comes with empowering a client to make positive change in his or her life also occurs in the political arena, only the advocacy and decisions you make have the potential to have a positive impact on the lives of many people at once”. Dr. Woodside emphasized political involvement and advocacy as a part of our professional and ethical responsibilities, emphasizing that it is necessary to “truly fight against social injustices and promote the general welfare of society and the development of individuals and communities.”

Lobbyists

Susanna Birdsong, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
J.D., American University

Current: Planned Parenthood Votes! South Atlantic
Director of Public Affairs; Registered Lobbyist



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Susanna realized she wanted to be one of the voices that influenced the decision-making process because she was “working in a system and wanting things to be more fair and equitable.” By lending her voice, Susanna is able to influence the language of bills and laws to make sure that everyone has a place at the table. For Susanna that meant learning how to take a much more front row seat so by obtaining her MSW/JD she was able to learn more about “how policy gets made and how laws get passed” while continuing to use her social work systems perspective to influence that process for the betterment of everyone.

“A lot of times social workers are the only folks talking to legislators about different populations of people and how these policies affect these people, particularly vulnerable and marginalized people.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

“I think that social workers have a unique understanding and an ability to talk about all different kinds of folks with legislators and decision makers people who are their clients and people they interact with in other ways and being able to build relationships with and have conversations with along the way.” Social work gave Mrs. Birdsong the skill-set to see these inequities and how they affected individuals. It allowed her to bring these stories to the table and create these relationships and conversations with policy makers to inform them in a way they may not be informed otherwise. Social workers bring a valuable perspective in sharing the experiences and circumstances of those folks.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

“I think that social workers have an ethical responsibility to serve their individual clients to the best of their ability and often that includes speaking up for clients and communities in political and policy spaces and advocacy is certainly the most effective way that I’ve found to be able to do that.”

Kay Castillo, BSW

Bachelor of Social Work, Campbell University

Current: National Association of Social Workers North Carolina
Director of Advocacy, Policy and Legislation



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Political awareness an integral part of her family structure and function, Kay's introduction to lobbying occurred during an internship while studying abroad in London during her undergraduate work at Campbell University. Placed at Marie Stopes International, Kay's introduction to political advocacy focused on women's health and teen issues where she delivered a presentation to Parliament. Later, she completed an internship at the National Association of Social Workers, North Carolina Chapter (NASW-NC), where she was further introduced to advocacy at the state level. Both experiences, abroad and domestic, showed Kay that "advocacy is a global issue. Seeing it as a global issue sparked that passion" and has translated into a career with the NASW-NC where she works to build relationships with fellow social workers and state officials to disseminate information to social workers on how certain issues will affect the profession and the populations they serve. Her advocacy work has helped her learn to balance the "reality of your own goals" in the context of what "really happens in government."

***"Political involvement can help people maintain their lives,
which are defined by state leaders."***

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

For Kay, social work has taught her to "look at a situation from the whole perspective. What has led a person to us, what is available to them, and look at a problem from different angles and have community partners." Kay feels social work is critical to the political process because social workers are present in a variety of settings and have a multi-faceted training that gives them an edge in understanding how legislation will impact their clients. In addition to the proliferation of social workers in various sectors, Kay has found social work's Code of Ethics to be a valuable tool when engaging in advocacy work at the state level. Using the Code to examine specific legislation and determine "how it supports or does not support the profession of social work" helps "lend credibility and professionalism to the issues we go after."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Social work and political involvement, according to Kay, go hand-in-hand in that, "We're community workers and legislators are community representatives — therefore, they NEED to hear from social workers from all over their districts. Outside of this, it is a great way to advocate for our clients — we need to better voice the issues in our districts by talking to our legislators and finding solutions." In addition to being vociferously in favor of a politically engaged social work profession, Kay also reminds social workers that political and social action are "in our code of ethics — the driving force of our profession."

Matt Gross, MSW

Master of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University

Current: North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
Assistant Secretary for Government Affairs



Motivation to work in the political arena:

After earning a Bachelor degree in Psychology with a minor in social work during his undergraduate career at North Carolina State University, Matt knew he “liked helping people and thought [becoming a therapist] was the best way” to do so. However, he quickly learned during the first year of his MSW program that he “liked helping [his] friends solve problems, but got easily frustrated with people who didn’t want [his] help.” It was a culmination of life and graduate school experiences, particularly his love for the social welfare policy course, that helped him determine with finality, that the “clinical route was not for” him. Working with the Department of Social Services around foster care issues emphasized this, because, at the time he was working with “great people who had willing clients who couldn’t get results, and I knew it was because of a broken system.” He realized that “policy change could help towards fixing the broken system.” Currently, he is using his obvious passion for “making larger scale policy change” by working as a lobbyist with Smart Start, where he examines the “parameters we’re operating in to figure out what is needed to achieve better results” for children and their families.

“We have a responsibility to promote public policy that creates social justice. Increasing opportunities for people to succeed should be the goal of social work and public policy.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

As a social worker who spends a vast amount of time disseminating information, mitigating threats that result from misinformation, and serving as an expert in child development for the benefit of legislators, Matt has found social work to be invaluable in his practice. Particularly, he recognizes that “it’s really the social justice lens that I look at everything through.” Additionally, the social work degree with its emphasis on education in conjunction with practical experience, “creates folks who enter the policy world with a better sense of what policy looks like on the ground and a more well-rounded view of social justice issues.” The holistic nature of the degree with its social justice focus helps Matt and other social work advocates work towards giving “the most folks the best shot of giving themselves and their families a good life through initiatives like high quality early childhood education, progressive tax policies that encourage upward mobility, and access to basic needs like housing, food, transportation and healthcare. If you don’t provide people with basic needs, it will be hard for them to flourish.”

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Matt feels that social workers should be more engaged in politics but reminds social workers that “doesn’t mean everyone should go macro. It could be local politics, working in the legislature, or somebody who works in a clinical setting but gets frustrated with a policy and uses that experience to inform those working at the policy level. Then you get a good policy grounded in practice.” In addition to encouraging social workers to become more politically active, he also urges social workers to “encourage their clients to exercise their right to vote by making sure they’re registered and have a way to get to the polls. We should ensure their economic position doesn’t create disenfranchisement and prevent them from expressing their voice.”

Alison Kiser, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Current: Planned Parenthood Votes! South Atlantic
Executive Director



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Alison always had an interest in the political process desiring to, “create change from the top down.” She feels the most effective way to “get change at an individual level, is at the macro level,” where policies and their implementation affect individuals and families at the direct practice level. To Alison, it is very clear that “we’re all connected — policy and direct practice level social workers. We serve the populations we’re advocating for,” speaking to her motivation to work towards informing the development of policies that best meet the needs of various populations. Towards this, Alison has been working with Planned Parenthood of Central North Carolina as a lobbyist since 2008 where she uses her passion to “draw people into the political process and encourage their participation through grassroots advocacy.” She devotes much of her time to analyzing policy and investigating policies that could occur in North Carolina. Additionally, she manages outreach efforts to engage supporters and potential supporters “about how they can help create systemic change.”

“As social workers we are obligated to make change wherever we see that change needs to occur.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Speaking again to the very nature of social work, where social workers both serve and advocate for their clients, Alison feels the Code of Ethics and social work emphasis on putting people first is what gives social workers a unique perspective on the political process. Additionally, she describes her belief that “the very basis of social work practice is the right our clients — anybody has — to self-determination,” which is what led her to work around public policy issues. She cites the NASW Code of Ethics as a guiding force for the value of client self-determination where, in her work with Planned Parenthood, “pregnancy decisions are personal and complex and as a social worker I want to make sure healthcare is a right, not a privilege.” She feels helping individuals gain access to the care they need “fits well with the social work ideal that people need to be able to make educated and informed decisions about their lives.” Based on her experiences as a social worker in public policy, Alison feels that social workers are generally “not creating legislation for legislation’s sake. The number one focus we have is on the people who will be impacted by the policy.” This person-centered perspective is valuable in “this type of work — you’re able to feel people out — legislators, potential supporters you’re trying to engage, and reaching a place where you can get something positive done together.”

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

When asked about the need for social workers to be engaged in the political process, Alison responds, “Definitely. I think social workers are ethically obligated to fight for their clients. Beyond that, we’re obligated to fight for our clients at whatever level necessary.” Whether clients are affected by public policy, lack of a needed program, or an agency policy, Alison feels social workers must “fight to make change, and often that has to happen in the political arena.” She reiterates the importance of social work presence in politics because the profession’s “perspective is valuable in educating leaders about what is going on and the challenges in their communities” to impact policies that affect positive change for the populations social work serves.

Karen McLeod, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Current: Benchmarks North Carolina
Lobbyist and CEO



Motivation to work in the political arena:

After realizing her strengths lay in macro social work, Karen has worked in macro positions at state and county levels, and is currently working in the private sector. In the private sector, she has found a “freedom to speak for clients that is amazing.” Her role as a Lobbyist and CEO of Benchmarks NC is not only to hold the state accountable for services, but also to educate the state regarding the needs of the populations she serves. Currently representing ninety agencies, Karen uses her training to “give a voice to social workers and clinicians who don’t have time to message for themselves because they’re doing the work” on the ground level.

“Social workers are supposed to be agents for social change. Apathy, for those not engaged, seems like they’ve lost their intent about what social work is all about.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Social work has equipped Karen to evaluate systems, identify needed changes, and “move pieces in place to improve quality of care” for the populations her organization serves. Particularly as an MSW lobbyist Karen can “speak social justice for those who can’t,” while seeking to improve quality of care across systems. Such improvement can influence the pursuit of social justice — which she describes as the root of social work. In addition to grounding her social work practice as a lobbyist in seeking social justice, Karen also uses social work skills to start where the client is, in this case legislators, and embrace that concept. Being able to start where the client is has allowed her to respect, if not always agree, with the people she works with, understanding she can use this skill to affect change. Social work has also taught her that politics is about “evoking systems change,” and to evoke change one must critically examine their position as a social worker, not only on an individual level, but also the systems level.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Strongly passionate about macro social work and political involvement that can help foster an environment of social justice in North Carolina, Karen states, “social workers are supposed to be an agent for social change. Apathy, for those not engaged, seems like they’ve lost their intent about what social work is all about.” While strongly emphasizing social workers’ responsibility to be politically engaged and informed, Karen does advise social workers to consider that most of what occurs at the political level “isn’t about right or wrong — that’s disheartening. But you have to find a balance. Understand how systems work, work in their confines, and be clear in yourself— that you are here for change.”

Alex Miller, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Current: Alex Miller Government Affairs
Lobbyist



Motivation to work in the political arena:

When describing his passion for lobbying, Alex states, "It was accidental." Prior to graduate school at UNC Chapel Hill, Alex provided direct services for adults with developmental disabilities. A state funded position, Alex noticed flaws at the policy level that "prevented qualified professionals from delivering quality services" to that population. Taking his direct practice experience to graduate school, Alex completed an internship at the Covenant with NC Children, where he tracked school violence issues and made policy recommendations for his internship's legislative agenda. Post-graduation, Alex was able to turn his interest in reducing school violence into a career, serving as a contract lobbyist, where his efforts helped result in the School Violence Prevention Act of 2009. Enjoying his time working at the state level, where he has found political involvement accessible, he serves his clients by building relationships with legislators and colleagues to affect change where possible, recognizing that "law isn't easy to change."

"Position yourself to be part of a solution. You're either involved in it, or it is happening to you."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Social Work, with its person-centered perspective, taught Alex to work with people where they are and not to impose his belief systems on others rather, to encourage others, like legislators, to "take ownership of a positive decision." Social Work's Code of Ethics also serves Alex as a tool to help inform the decisions he makes as a lobbyist on a daily basis. Similarly, he has found social work's "strong tradition of hands-on work" to be valuable. With years of direct experience, Alex elaborates that, "if you're going to be involved in shaping social policy, you should have experience working on the ground level. You need to see how consumers and practitioners' lives look. Always keeping foremost in our minds who it is we're trying to serve."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Alex feels everyone should experience political involvement and "more social workers are needed here," with the caveat that dedicated political involvement "isn't for everybody." Political involvement is an individual decision that "can be challenging and rewarding." Often, in his work he has found "You're the only person speaking for those you represent and that is not always easy." The lack of understanding in the general population about what social work is, and the stereotypes that accompany social work and the populations it serves can make political involvement difficult. However, Alex states that, "as a profession, social work could do more education about the profession. If social work issues are seen as crucial [in politics], it's more difficult to justify cuts that could hurt others."

Advocates

Matt Anderson, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of Montana

Current: Children's Home Society of North Carolina

Vice President of Programs; "From Place to Place"
Documentary about children aging out of foster care,
Producer



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Matt Anderson cites the influence of a fellow MSW student who worked for a United States House of Representative member as his motivation to become politically active. Matt explained that the impact of the work that social workers do is inseparable from politics. Matt says, "Everything we do as social workers and everything that our clients experience is happening within the political and policy making context." Matt's primary area of practice is within the child welfare field; he states that policies at the federal, state, and local levels can improve or detract from the quality of care provided to clients. Matt's experience of nine years of advocacy has informed his views on the importance of macro social work. Matt stated that by "becoming politically involved I have been able to intervene in a way that changes the experience of all children in foster care rather than just the children who are my clients."

"Social workers have an opportunity and an obligation to share their knowledge and expertise with elected officials to help them make the best and most informed decisions."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Matt finds that social workers are uniquely trained to work within the political arena. He explained that due to the mass of introduced legislation, over 1,000 bills in the 2017 session, many of the legislators introduce and support policy that is "outside of their areas of expertise and experience." Matt says that social workers have an "opportunity and an obligation to share their knowledge and expertise with elected officials to help them make the best and most informed decisions." Matt emphasized the importance of social workers in advocating for a focus on impact and measuring outcomes to "inform evidence based policy making decisions that promote effective use of public resources."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Matt believes that all social workers should be politically involved, in fact we are required to do so by our Code of Ethics. Matt stresses the importance of involvement of all levels of practitioners; whether you are "working in a clinical setting with individual clients or running an organization, all social workers should be aware of how the political context impacts their work, their programs, and their clients." Matt believes that social workers have the greatest impact in this context. He said that more social workers should seek elected offices, work as lobbyists, and directly advocate on behalf of individuals, families, and communities.

Jared Cates, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Current: Carolina Farm Stewardship Association,
Community Mobilizer



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Since 2012, Mr. Cates has worked as the Community Mobilizer at The Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA). CFSA works in a variety of roles to support farmers, food producers and community food systems in both states. Mr. Cates explains that, "Part of that work is through advocating for fair farm and food policies." As a member of the CFSA Policy Team he works to support policy efforts at the North Carolina General Assembly, at the South Carolina State House and on Capitol Hill through their grassroots network of community advocates. Mr. Cates motivation to work in the policy arena comes from a personal desire for positive change in our food system. He has seen the drastic effect that poverty and food insecurity can have on families and the negative outcomes that can happen to individuals through overconsumption of processed and unhealthy foods. He has also seen the effect that our policies have had on the agricultural community and on the overall health of our population and our ecosystems. Mr. Cates works in the policy arena because issues like poverty, food insecurity, obesity, disappearing farmers and farmland, and drastic increases in pesticide use are all outcomes that are the direct result of policies created at the state and federal level. He is motivated in his work because he has an opportunity to help bring a voice to the political system.

"The political arena is an opportunity to affect positive change and to improve our overall societal health."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

"Social work brings solid grounding in community organizing and advocacy to the table. The original mission of social work was centered on championing the rights of society's most vulnerable members and the rights of our citizens is at the core of work in the advocacy and policy arena. The principles of social work also bring education and social action together to empower communities to work for change." Social work gave Mr. Cates the tools to empower communities to engage in positive change around their community food system. Mr. Cates points out that "connecting resources and people, mobilizing public opinion, and interacting with the organizations and agencies who serve the needs of the agricultural community are just some of the ways that we work to champion the rights of farmers and our communities through active participation in the political process." He says, "Ultimately, the political arena exists to serve all of the citizens of our country; this is often forgotten. The core values of social work help bring that idea of service back to politics."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

"Social workers bring a unique perspective to public service and should be engaged in the political arena. Running for office or working for elected officials is at its core, working to be a champion for the rights of citizens."

Jenny Gadd, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Current: Alberta Professional Services, Chief Compliance Officer
Chair, Annual Legislative Breakfast on Mental Health
Planning Committee, 2013 NASW-NC Myrna Miller
Wellons Advocate of the Year Award Recipient



Motivation to work in the political arena:

In the summer of 2012, Jenny was drawn into policy and advocacy in response to a crisis. As an experienced group home director and graduate MSW student doing fieldwork, Jenny was uniquely positioned to foresee the long-term effects of budget cuts that would eliminate a third of the funding for group homes across the state. Jenny says, "At the time very few people were speaking out for those living in group homes and policy makers needed to hear from the people affected. More than myself it was my clients and their families who became advocates, experiencing full citizenry as they influenced policy rather than being its victims." As a social worker, Jenny helped to amplify their voices and bridge the connections that increased their political capital. She points out that "Without her clients' willingness and courage to speak about the experience of mental illness our advocacy efforts would have fallen short."

"Client advocacy, whether it is at the case or cause level, is at the core of the social worker skill set and is fundamental to everything we do."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Jenny points out "Social work brings several unique tools to the political arena – our systems perspective, our training, and the NASW Code of Ethics. These are needed in the political arena to resolve problems in sustainable ways. Our perspective allows us to see how a policy or law is impacting our clients. Our training gives us excellent communication skills, and the ability to interact on many levels." Jenny concludes, "We can communicate this perspective to budget and lawmakers. Our commitment to service, social justice and the NASW Code of Ethics continues to guide our practice and conduct across all settings."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Jenny says that social workers should seek political involvement and that social workers should encourage our clients to participate as well. She points out, "All our clients are vulnerable, and social workers should strive to be aware of policy level changes that adversely affect our clients. It is very empowering for clients to find their political voice, and to inform policy makers about the outcomes that legislation has on their lives and services. Client advocacy, whether it is at the case or cause level, is at the core of the social worker skill set and is fundamental to everything we do." She also reminds us that social workers have an ethical responsibility to promote the value of our profession in society. And believes that social workers should be particularly involved with Medicaid and other government funding that supports social workers.

Virgil Hayes, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of Pennsylvania

Current: National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors,
Manager of Drug User Health

Previously: North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition, Advocacy Manager



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Virgil has been working in the field of harm reduction for several years and chooses to be politically active so that he can influence systemic changes by providing “harm reduction for systems.” Currently, Virgil is working with public health departments to advocate for the use of a drug user-friendly framework and by promoting community buy-in of harm reduction practices. Previously, Virgil worked with the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition promoting policies that would help improve the quality of life and decrease the criminalization of people who use drugs. Virgil feels that, as a social worker, he is an asset in getting “people to see the bigger picture.”

“Social workers make some of the best politicians because we understand the systems that impact the lives of the people we work with.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Virgil spoke of the unique perspective that social work brings to the political arena. He highlighted the many micro social workers who work directly with clients, and the importance of understanding the way systems impact vulnerable and disenfranchised populations is when working for policies that promote social justice. Virgil stated that “Sometimes, we call people out when we need to call people in,” and spoke of the importance of utilizing a social work framework in advocacy to build bridges where there are divides and to harness the combined power of various institutions and resources that already exist. Mr. Hayes believes that the values and ethics of the social work profession allow social workers to invest and engage in political advocacy in a way that many other professions cannot. However, he stated that political advocacy can “create a sense of urgency” and that it is critical for social workers to prioritize “taking care of self, mentally and emotionally.”

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

“Social workers make some of the best politicians because we understand the systems that impact the lives of people we work with.” Mr. Hayes’ advice to social workers who seek to work in the macro field is to network and “give yourself time.” He mentioned that his male privilege and ability to adequately network with others before seeking employment played a key role in his ability to obtain a career in macro social work immediately out of graduate school. Virgil’s advice to recently graduated social workers who seek political involvement is to be patient with yourself because “you’re not going to know everything you need to know straight out of the gate” and that is okay.

Chase Holleman, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Current: Guilford County Solution to the Opioid Problem (GCSTOP)

2018 NASW-NC Myrna Miller Wellons Advocate of the Year Award Recipient

2016 NASW-NC Toby Brown Award BSW Recipient



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Chase has been passionate and vocal against injustice for as long as he can remember, and he also credits his experiences providing direct services for motivating him to become an advocate for systemic change. Chase speaks to the influence that his parents had on his views on injustice saying, "It is a value that was instilled in me by my mother (a social worker) and my father (a politician)." Chase also discussed the ways that systemic inequalities and injustice impact our most vulnerable populations stating, "It is deeply unsettling to work hard serving folks and know that there are better ways to do so. The United States does a poor job creating systems informed by research and evidence. This happens at the expense of those we serve. It is maddening to know that much of the injustice we encounter daily can easily be addressed and solved, but we are simply unwilling to change our systems to do so. The most obvious example within my area of focus is the interdiction of addiction. The evidence is clear that addiction is a brain disease that, like most chronic illness, is highly correlated with a high number of adverse childhood experiences. Yet, we put some of our most vulnerable people in cages as management for their illness. To further compound the system of injustice, a disproportionate amount of people of color are incarcerated. For me, my responsibility as a social worker is to address these systems of injustice at every level."

"For me, my responsibility as a social worker is to address these systems of injustice at every level."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

"The people elected to serve our communities often are misinformed about the issues in the community they are meant to serve." Chase discusses all of the unique abilities and skills that social workers bring to the table stating, "Social work is in unique position to share the stories of those we serve with politicians. Social workers have the ability to empathize and accurately communicate the messages of those who do not have the resources or privilege to be heard by their elected leaders. Social workers have the ability to organize groups of people in solidarity."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Chase speaks to the role that social workers play as advocates saying, "I believe the profession of social work demands political involvement and advocacy. An ethical principle of social workers is that social workers challenge social injustice. The Code of Ethics goes on to say that social workers do this by "meaningful participation in decision making for all people. Clinical social workers have the unique ability to do this both with and on behalf their clients. If we will not take initiative, who will?" Chase emphasized the important responsibility that social workers have to be politically involved and to advocate for change in our society and to stand up for those who are vulnerable in our society.

Nicholle Karim, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Current: North Carolina Healthcare Association
Senior Director, Policy Development

Previously: National Alliance on Mental Illness North Carolina (NAMI NC)
Interim Executive Director, Registered Lobbyist
2017 NASW-NC Myrna Miller Wellons Advocate of the Year
Award Recipient



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Prior to working at National Alliance for Mental Illness North Carolina (NAMI NC), Ms. Karim worked in numerous direct care settings with children, adolescents, and families including working in Child Protective Services, an adolescent female level III group home, Intensive In-Home, and as a program director for a child/adolescent day treatment program. She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and specialized in providing treatment for children and adolescents with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. So, why leave the clinical side? Ms. Karim has known from the beginning of her career that she wanted to practice macro social work in the role of public policy and advocacy. However, she felt it was important for her to work in a direct practice setting first, in order to understand the complexity of the Mental Health system and how policies impact providers, clinicians, and most importantly, families and those receiving services. Ms. Karim stated: "I have always enjoyed working on big-picture issues and social work training has given me a wonderful framework to do just that. Because of my training, I have been equipped with a holistic perspective that allows me to see issues from multiple perspectives and angles."

"I have always enjoyed working on big-picture issues and social work gave me the framework to do just that."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

"We, social workers, are able to see many different perspectives and facets of a singular issue." Ms. Karim believes social work education trains social workers to become excellent listeners and communicators, which is invaluable in the political arena. Oftentimes, social workers have the ability to create or find common ground with various stakeholder groups, which is so important when creating the breeding grounds for change.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

In discussing social work and the need for political action, Ms. Karim urged social workers to become involved stating: "I think everyone, regardless of profession or training, should have some level of involvement in politics, whether in their local community, or with state or federal elected officials. We all have a valuable voice and perspective that should be heard!"

Jack Register, MSW

Master of Social Work, Joint MSW Program at North Carolina A&T State University & University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Current: Jack Register and Associates, PLLC

Previously: National AHEC Organization, CEO
NASW-NC, Registered Lobbyist



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Jack has always been politically active and involved but the motivation to become even more so came from an outside source and happened during his graduate school years. Of his political involvement, Jack says, "Actually, Myrna Miller-Wellons who used to be the director of government relations for NASW-NC when I was in graduate school was in that position and she said, 'You need to come be part of our public policy committee.' Myrna was sort of the one who pulled me kicking and screaming in to that committee when I joined NASW-NC and from there it was the reason why I got involved and started to see social work from a political point of view." Jack is also a clinician and has always "floated back and forth between being a public policy person and being a clinician." Which gives him a unique perspective and its why he considers himself to be a "political mental health social worker."

"We understand how policy actually impacts people on the ground and at the individual level, we understand how it impacts communities, and we really understand the big picture discriminatory systemic sort of issues."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

"Social workers are systems people so we understand how policy actually impacts people on the ground and at the individual level, we understand how it impacts communities, and we really understand the big picture discriminatory systemic sort of issues." Jack says, "We (social workers) understand the implications and the "trickle-down effect" that this is going to have on folks. The problem social work has is that we don't know how to use our voice appropriately at all three levels. We're really good at advocating for our clients, but we don't talk about advocating for the profession itself so that we can be in these positions to be able to stop the worst of the bad policies whenever they happen." Jack concludes, "I think social work is coming in to its own politically and we are remembering our roots in terms of our Jane Addams sort of philosophy of joining with communities to create change. I hope that with as many social workers sort of filtering in to all these others areas of practice and these other advocacy organizations that we will start to see change in that over the next 10 years."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

"It's in our Code of Ethics, we have to! I actually think social workers should be seeking political office. I think we need more social work folks to step forward and actually be involved politically which a lot of folks don't think they're allowed to do. I firmly believe social work is in an identity crisis right now because people identify with their area of practice before they identify with their profession or they identify with their agency before they identify with their profession. And they forget that they're connected to a much larger framework and responsible to that framework. So my hope is that in the next 10-15 years we see more social workers in the public office and we see more social workers actively involved in politics because if we don't have it we're never going to create the kind of 'see change' that we really need."

Lynne Walter, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of Michigan

Current: NARAL Pro-Choice NC, Advocacy and Organizing Manager

Previously: ACLU of North Carolina, Reproductive Freedom Fellow



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Lynne believes that it is her personal and professional obligation to be politically active. Ms. Walters states that not only because of our ethical duty but because she realized that “because of luck of the draw I was born white, by luck of the draw I was born in the united states... I have all these unearned privileges because of that.” Ms. Walters motivation to advocate is because she is aware that there are people who are going to listen more to what she says “simply because of my skin color and because of the fact that I was born in this country than they would to people who of different ethnicities or different nationalities even if were saying the exact same thing.” She states that it is her responsibility as a human and as a social worker to use my unearned privilege and to put it on the line and to fight against oppression.

“We think in multiple directions and realize unintended consequences of policy and advocacy, and that's another reason why we have to get involved in this kind of work.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Lynne spoke of the unique position that the perspective of a social work education puts individuals in. Social workers understand “not only how politics and policies happen and occur and all of those processes, but we also understand how they impact people and families and communities which is really unique and extremely different from other professions.” Ms. Walters emphasized that our framing is rare because of the “intimate and direct knowledge of not only the challenges and struggles that people are facing but how they will be either positively or negatively impacted by policies, politics and laws.” Such was the case when the voter suppression bill happened, Lynne says “I know a ton of social workers who understood that it would not make voting ‘safer’ it will actually have terrible consequences on African Americans, elders, students and young people who want to vote.” The fact that social workers can think in multiple directions and realize unintended consequences of policy and advocacy is yet another unique thing that Lynne believes social workers bring to the table. Social workers work with people and families and communities and we can help lift up their stories and bring their voices to different tables and different meetings.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

“It’s not that we should, we have to!” Lynne points out that her favorite section, 6.04 in the NASW Code of Ethics says that social workers must engage in social and political action, “It’s not an option for us.” Ms. Walter believes it’s something that we absolutely have to do, as social workers we know how to bridge gaps and bring people to the table. In politics that is needed because there are so many people who are engaged in politics who have never talked to someone who is different than them or haven’t considered how certain pieces of legislation may impact certain people. It’s a unique skill set that social workers bring to the table, a skill set that is very much needed in the political arena.

Barbara Zelter, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Previously: North Carolina State University Department of Social Work Lecturer & Bachelor of Social Work Field Coordinator
2014 NASW-NC Myrna Miller Wellons Advocate of the Year Award Recipient



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Before receiving her MSW, Ms. Zelter served as an employment counselor, an editor, a refugee sponsor, and a crisis counselor volunteer for Hopeline. Ms. Zelter notes that she was initially drawn to the social work profession even as a child stating, "I noticed things like rich and poor neighborhoods and I seemed drawn to those living nontraditional lives on the edges. It seems to me that some people are born with a kind of radar that makes them notice social unfairness." Ms. Zelter ran a statewide nonprofit called JUBILEE, a project of the North Carolina Council of Churches. JUBILEE emphasizes getting the voices of the families in the welfare system into new welfare reform plans. They also help trained teams in religious congregations to partner with families who are facing the loss of benefits.

"I challenge all service providers to always see individual situations in the analytical context of broad sociopolitical structures."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

"I tell my students in the BSW and MSW programs that they and those they serve are the experts in life on the ground in North Carolina." Ms. Zelter states. "Social workers are trained to understand social welfare history, programs, and policies, and they are also everyday taxpayers who pay for those programs and other state funded initiatives." Ms. Zelter concludes, "We do not live in glass houses or bubbles of privilege like those many policymakers inhabit. We can therefore assist lawmakers with our many compelling stories of real life on the streets, and what is needed to build a more honorable, equitable, and life-enhancing state."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

As a community organizer and now as a teacher of social work students, Ms. Zelter hopes to break down the mysteries of policy for students, and help them see how they, in fact, are experts who have the standing and skills to "bear witness as Outsiders (e.g., Moral Monday protesters) and Insiders (e.g., lobbyists, Social Work Advocacy Day visitors). Most Americans think politics are crooked and that they have no voice in policy." Ms. Zelter concludes, "Our job as mature social workers is to help the next generation see how they can start with one thing like a passion for a particular population and how that population is being affected by a particular bill or policy."

Lauren Zingraff, MSW

Master of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University

Current: Executive Director at Friends of Residents in Long Term Care

Previously: Executive Director at SaySo Inc.; National Multiple Sclerosis Society, MS Navigator
2015 NASW-NC Myrna Miller Wellons Advocate of the Year Award Recipient



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Growing up in Raleigh, North Carolina, Ms. Zingraff attended North Carolina State University where she received her B.A. in Communications. After working 12 years in corporate America, she decided to return to school to get her Master of Social Work from Virginia Commonwealth University. Ms. Zingraff has always been personally driven to seek social justice, and after completing her MSW she became even more aware of people who did not have a voice because of the systems set up to marginalize those in vulnerable situations. Her Communications degree convinced her that advocacy was the perfect way to bring a voice to oppressed populations. As the SaySo Executive director Ms. Zingraff found her niche. Working with foster care youth, she saw children whom, by no fault of their own, were forgotten. In her work, there were always two sides of the coin: one side heart-breaking but the other side was an honor because she was advocating for those who not only survived but thrived under difficult situations. Ms. Zingraff believes foster care is a silent epidemic. She states, "There is no normal for these youth." When her job got tough, or she had a bad day, she remembers being told once: "No matter what you think your hardest day is, you have never lived in foster care." This helped her remember what she was constantly fighting for, and to not give up until changes were made to support her clients.

"Advocacy lets your voice be heard and represent those who have no voice because they are systematically marginalized."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Social work is one of the few professions that runs the full gambit of a person's life. She says; "It doesn't matter if you are pre-womb or post-mortem, social workers are working with these individuals." Ms. Zingraff believes that there is not one political issue that touches a group whom social workers are not involved with. She insists that it is not a political affiliation: Democrat or Republican. Ms. Zingraff states; "No matter which way you vote in your private life: social justice is part of our ethical principal and a driving force in the profession. Social workers are professionals and therefore they must adhere to the Code of Ethics while advocating in support of their clients."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Ms. Zingraff believes everyone can be involved in the legislative process and avoids using the word 'political' because of the negative connotations and associations it holds. As a social worker the decisions made in the legislative process dictate the funding and resources available for the programs. "A social worker voice is not being heard when you do not advocate, and your voice represents those marginalized individuals whom we work with first hand," stated Ms. Zingraff. "As a profession we can not only support our clients face-to-face but we must secure funding and social justice to continue to be able to offer these supports and services."

Past Positions

Donna Bell, MSW

Master of Social Work, Smith College

Previously Elected Position: Served three terms on Chapel Hill Town Council



Motivation to work in the political arena:

After obtaining her MSW from Smith College, Donna realized she desired “to do macro” level work in addition to her direct practice. With support and encouragement from others, Donna sought a position on the Chapel Hill Town Council in an effort to weave her interests in both macro and direct practice social work. As a member of the Council, Donna attends various meetings and public hearings while also “working with folks in the community.” Ultimately, her role as a Council member is to “advocate for and maintain programming that benefits the community and alleviate things that could cause folks harm.”

“The only way we can get the best is to have a variety of voices involved, including social workers.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

As a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Donna finds that her training assists her regularly in her work as an elected official. Social work, which to Donna, is “all about systems” bolsters her political acumen by helping Donna “find ways to change, adjust and modify systems that aren’t serving the community.” Working to serve Chapel Hill alongside economists, dentists, businessmen and others allows her an opportunity to infuse her public service with the “perspective and values of social work,” as she and her colleagues collaborate around issues like “zoning ordinances, transportation plans, housing recommendations, and how to distribute funds for certain services.”

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

When discussing whether social workers should actively seek political involvement, Donna states, “Yes, I most definitely do.” Recognizing the need for committed and involved individuals in politics, Donna describes that “lots of advocates and voices supporting different things in the political sphere” are needed in order to affect positive changes for the populations social workers serve. She encourages all social workers to seek some form of involvement, from serving on commissions and committees to serving on local and state Boards and in elected positions.

Dan Beerman, MSW

Master of Social Work, Master of Divinity, Rutgers University and Princeton Theological Seminary

Past: Chair of the Winston-Salem Transit Authority Board,
Lecturer, Joint Masters Program at University of North
Carolina Greensboro and North Carolina A&T State
University



Motivation to work in the political arena:

An active member of NASW-NC, Dan has served on the NASW-NC Political Action for Candidate Election (PACE) Committee, and Chaired the committee from 1983 to 2005, with a brief interruption when a colleague chaired the committee prior to joining the NASW-NC staff. As a committee member and Chair, Dan worked to ensure the Association's members were well informed about their "political options," and, as a group, worked to "be as engaged in the political process as the law allowed." Dan expressed a desire to run for office at one point, but working for county government at the time made political involvement difficult. After realizing there are numerous ways "to have impact on what our society values" politically, Dan looked to Boards and Commissions for involvement, and served as head of the Winston-Salem Transit Authority Board of Directors from 1996 to 2012. When asked about the connection between transit and social work, Dan described that "core riders are low income, receive public benefits, and can't afford transportation. This is where I can have influence and authority with legal clout to use money for what is the greatest good."

"Politics is the authoritative allocation of values. We deal with decision that are made by authorities and we need a place at the table."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Specific to his experience with the Transit Authority, Dan found he was able to "give the social work perspective on Boards and Commissions and always reminded colleagues who the clients were and what the social work perspective was." Social work, with its person-centered focus, ensures practitioners consider the client first and, in Dan's experience, this can translate well into political involvement and leadership roles from the PACE Committee to heading the Transit Authority. Additionally, social work has continually reminded Dan that political action is "all about relationships" and he has cultivated good relationships over the years "with a variety of people who have respect for" the work he has done, politically and professionally. But, according to Dan, what "we [social workers] really bring is — we can inform people. When they're puzzled about why someone may interact with the world the way they do."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

In considering the importance of politically active social workers, Dan felt that "all social workers should find the right level of political involvement for themselves." Understanding that different people will have different levels of comfort and interest in the political process, Dan reiterated that the NASW Code of Ethics "calls us to find a level of political engagement — we are professionally obligated to be involved at some level." Whether you are involved in voter registration, work on an election campaign, or run for office, social workers can offer a perspective and skill set that has the capacity to enhance the political process.

MaryAnn Black, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Previous Positions: Durham County Commissioner, 1994 Social Worker of the Year (NASW), 1995 Social Worker of the Year (NASW-NC); NC House of Representatives District 29

Associate Vice President for Community Relations at Duke University Health System



Motivation to work in the political arena:

A respected member of her Durham community, MaryAnn has been politically active since her teens — political involvement a lifestyle preference. In college, MaryAnn was actively involved in leadership capacities with the campus' YWCA, her sorority and more. Her interest in political action was reinforced during graduate school at UNC Chapel Hill, when a professor made the comment that “the way in which we can truly serve is to go into public office and have an impact on legislation and public policy.” This comment reinforced MaryAnn’s passion for politics, and in 1990 she chose to strive towards becoming a public servant and influence policy creation and implementation, by running for a position on the Durham County Board of Commissioners. Once elected, she served on the Board from 1990 to 2002. From 1996 to 2002, MaryAnn served her community as Chair of the Durham County Commissioners. As an elected official, MaryAnn worked with her colleagues to address a gamut of issues regarding land usage, water quality, public education, and changes to the Department of Social Services “to enhance delivery of service.” MaryAnn and her fellow Commissioners oversaw and provided funding for various services including: education, public health, and the Sheriff’s Department.

“Clinical work is good and helps many, but if you want a bigger impact and to help others in a large way, politics gives you a way to do that.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

One quality MaryAnn feels social work contributes to the political arena is “the art of compromise.” When working in a politicized environment, social work skills and values “help you work together, understand group dynamics, management, and how the mind works. All of those teachings combine to give a perspective and skill set that allows one to stand outside of himself, observe what’s going on, and figure out how to work with people for the greater good of the people.” Additionally, social work’s understanding of systems was valuable to MaryAnn during her stint as a Commissioner, stating “understanding how you work, how systems work — helps you to be a good elected official.”

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

MaryAnn’s obvious passion for political action is clear in her assertion that it is important not only for social workers, but everyone, to be politically active, and that there are a variety of ways to do so. Whether involvement is through “your neighborhood, church, local, state, or federal government—for any form of government to work well, we need people with different disciplines involved. It makes a better political body.” MaryAnn also offers the reminder that when being politically active, “it is not about who’s right or wrong, the winner or the loser. The real win is when you do something good for the people.”

Representative Black passed away in 2020. [Please see more about her life and social work career here.](#)

Dana Courtney, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Past: Training and Organizational Development Director,
Durham County Department of Social Services, 1974-
1999, 2016 NASW-NC Myrna Miller Wellons Advocate
of the Year Award Recipient



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Dana's motivation to be politically involved through advocacy began as a practicing social worker in public social services agencies. She witnessed oppression, discrimination and lack of client groups having voices in the very programs developed to address the economic, educational, employment, health, housing, safety and legal issues the client groups experienced. She saw the need to become involved in nonpartisan efforts for change, along with administrators and those responsible for laws and policy development. Dana believes that social work practitioners play a "critical role of serving to inform decision makers at all levels of government about client problems and needs." Dana also cites the importance of NASW Past President Nancy Humphreys and her charge to social workers to develop and use their political skills and advocate for constructive change. Realizing her style and best use of self, she advocated for and with social workers and other social services staff to gain support for their work with power brokers.

"Every action, small or large, can support healthy political systems."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Dana says that social workers are educated and skilled in "systems thinking and problem solving interventions," whether practicing with individuals, families, groups, communities and/or institutions. Social workers are motivators, facilitators, advocates, 'canaries in the mines' and often serving as the conscience of communities for promoting social justice and needed change. She explains that social workers value working with clients to support and develop capacity and self-determination; through fighting oppression and facilitating clients to advocate for themselves.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

"In addition to my personal and professional values and beliefs informing my practice the NASW Code of Ethics holds us responsible as well." She stated that the statements made in our Code of Ethics mean that regardless of practice arena, social workers are responsible for seeking opportunities to use skills and knowledge to help shape social justice for all and to fight social injustice - and political action is critical to both. She believes that social workers are uniquely positioned to seek out gaps in healthy functioning systems. Dana stated that social workers are in "positions, both as professionals and individuals, to help form and maintain responsive systems which can facilitate individuals, groups and communities to set and reach goals to promote a healthy society for all. Dana emphasized that not every social worker should feel the pressure to run for public office, even as many opportunities are available at all levels of government. We can support others with common values to run, we can provide information and person power in campaigns, and we can monitor public officials and public bodies. Every action, small or large, can support healthy political systems.

Erika Hagensen, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of Washington

Previously: The Arc of North Carolina, Assistant Director for Policy



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Erika distinctly recalls the moment she realized her passion for systemic change. Serving on the Board of Directors for a disability nonprofit in Oregon, she recalls the group asking an adult the organization supported to describe what it is like to live with a disability. He wrote one word on a sheet of paper — oppression. This moment served as a “call to action,” motivating Erika to pursue an MSW. Erika’s enthusiasm to affect systemic change was also influenced by her recognition and appreciation of previous leaders in the disability community who championed “the rights I currently enjoy because of their work.” Erika has dedicated much of her career to analyzing policy around intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) issues. She has worked in coalition with partner organizations and stakeholder groups, and lobbied at the federal level around disability issues, including successfully working to restore the Americans with Disability Act to align with Congress’ initial intent. Erika worked with The Arc of North Carolina where she viewed her priority as “increasing participation at the federal level, so our community could understand and respond to issues effectively.”

“Clinical support is important, but without systemic change, we will be providing the same clinical support forever.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Erika recalls during the course of her experiences in public policy, “so many people [she] valued and saw as effective, turned out to be social workers.” For her, the connection between social work and politics is evident, as the profession’s strengths in “consensus building and bringing diverse and unlikely stakeholders to the table” helps her as a social worker in policy to best identify “how a policy or law affects a population. Any number of degrees can teach you to analyze policy. Social work, in addition to critical analysis, emphasizes social justice and helping people understand their role in making good policy, strong communities and effective government.” In addition to being centered around social justice, Erika finds that social workers are adept at striking a “balance between being strong and principled but also being good partners,” allowing them to collaborate with those they don’t always agree with, and “leave the door open” for future communications. In policy, “you never know how you will meet one another, on a different topic or on a different day.”

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

When asked if she felt social workers should seek to be politically involved, Erika responded; “Yes, but in a way that it makes sense for the person. Not everyone needs to quit their job and move to D.C. like I did.” She recognizes that at the clinical level, practitioners do impactful work, see “the effects of policy long before [policy practitioners] may” and “need to be able to communicate these issues to people who make policy.” Without that insight, we can’t move forward. Furthermore, Erika feels that social workers, and others, have to first recognize their unique and valuable role in many areas of policy, before they can become truly engaged. “We need to teach people — including ourselves — that everyone is ‘a policy person’. That doesn’t have to mean a content expert or lobbyist, necessarily. A policy person is someone who shows up, participates, tells their story and empowers other people to do the same; “a skill deeply embedded in social work practice.” “As social workers, we can help people discover that their voice is important, needed, and necessary for government to work well.”

Michelle Johnson, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Previous Elected Position: Carrboro Board of Alderman, Member



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Michelle's motivation to seek elected office generated from her deep connection to her Carrboro community. Michelle has lived in Carrboro for eleven years "in the heart of downtown", where she has found her community to be welcoming and likeable. Her strong appreciation for her community, high level of involvement, and her social work skills as a private practitioner, made her feel she would be a valuable addition to the Board. Elected in the fall of 2011, she stays busy "getting up to speed with issues the Board is involved in, talking to the community, town, and town staff." These issues have required her to learn about many new things including the ins and outs of land use, public works, streets, sidewalks, building standards, water quality and how these things will impact the community and residents."

"Politics is at the root of community organizing and social justice, and that is at the heart of social work and how it started."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

As an Alderman, Michelle has found her role has been one of "facilitator, mediator, and advocate," all of which are firmly embedded in social work. Although new to the Board, she has found that "sometimes [the Board] loses sight about why we're talking about issues and who it will impact. Social work helps mitigate this." Towards that end, she has found social work's nature of "problem solving, being creative, active listening, looking at long-term goals and how to get there," have all been practical skills for an elected official. In addition to those skills, she has found that social work's deftness for compromise or "willingness to be in the gray" has been useful, particularly in considering the "multi-dimensions to issues that come up. It's important because we're conditioned to be binary thinkers, but life is not that way. Multiple things and multiple truths happen at once." Very complimentary of social work's contributions to politics, she states "lawyers bring the law perspective, environmentalists bring the environmental perspective, and social work can bring the importance of process and transparency to the table."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

When discussing the need for social workers to be politically active, Michelle states, "I absolutely think so." Social workers, with their unique training and perspectives have the potential to enhance the political process and politics "needs social workers who have these skills and can remember the citizens who elect us and we are accountable to." Personally, as an elected official, Michelle feels that "social work helps us stay true and remember why we're doing the work we're doing and stay intentional."

Howard Lee, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Previous Elected Position: Mayor of Chapel Hill, North Carolina
North Carolina State Senator



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Mr. Lee always had "a fascination with politics," but it was not until he joined the military in the 1960s that he truly "began to understand the influence of politics." In 1967, a year after earning his MSW, Mr. Lee chose to run for president of his local NASW chapter and was elected. Following his term as president of his local NASW chapter, Mr. Lee entered himself as a candidate in Chapel Hill Mayoral elections. In 1969, Mr. Lee was elected Mayor, becoming one of only three African-Americans holding mayoral positions in the United States at that time. Mr. Lee served his community in a variety of ways, perhaps most memorably, by implementing free public transportation in Chapel Hill. Following three successful Mayoral terms, in 1990 Mr. Lee was elected to the North Carolina Senate, where he served for thirteen years. Since serving his state as his local NASW chapter president, Chapel Hill Mayor, and North Carolina Senator, Mr. Lee has been Chairman of the North Carolina State Board of Education, Executive Director of the North Carolina Education Cabinet, and works extensively with the Deans of Social Work and Deans of Education.

"Social workers should be influencing policy and not just implementing policy."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Originally hoping to pursue a law degree, Mr. Lee found himself working as a mental health specialist in the military, when he first began considering social work. In a time when "social work primarily focused on case work" Mr. Lee knew he "wanted to do community organizing." Since embracing his interest in social work, Mr. Lee has learned the benefit of social work presence in political issues. Having seen legislation pass that is sometimes harmful to children, families, and others, Mr. Lee recognized that social workers' unique perspective and understanding of the issues that affect vulnerable populations gives them the skills and responsibility to be "influencing policy and not just implementing policy."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

In discussing social work and the need for political action, Mr. Lee urged social workers to "engage in the political process," feeling it is the profession's responsibility to be actively involved in crafting policy, rather than exclusively implementing the result and dealing with impacts at the service level. Regarding the lack of social work presence in the political realm, Mr. Lee described that it can hurt the clients social workers serve, in addition to maintaining "the profession's passive image of only providing case work." Mr. Lee felt this lack of clearly defined role possibilities "does not help recruitment into the profession. What we have to do as social workers is let the public know the value of the services we provide and the need for social workers in business and in government."

Laura O'Neal, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Previously: Democratic Women, Chairwoman



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Laura has led a full career in human services for 41 years, during which she has served as Director of Social Services, where she learned the correlation between upper-level political decisions and the impact on social workers and the populations they work with at the service level. As a social worker in social and human services, Laura learned that cooperation is needed from both Democrats and Republicans to ensure quality service delivery. However, when a position is funded by the County Government, according to Laura, it can be difficult to be politically active. Her political activity spiked when, after retirement, the local Sheriff recruited Laura to manage his election campaign. Following a successful campaign, Laura received other requests from candidates and began her transition to heightened political action. This new level of political engagement led her to volunteer to be nominated for the Chair position of the Democratic Women. As Chairwoman, she takes the lead in "organizing and executing ground plans for the Democratic party" in her community.

"Anger brings energy, as long as you channel it correctly."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

As Chairwoman of the Democratic Women, Laura is able to use principles of social work on a daily basis. The requirement of social workers to seek social justice "plays a large part" in her work. Whether educating people in her community about their voting rights, or working to "break through distrust" to reach out to marginalized community members, Laura has found that social work offers a "wonderful balance of empathy, listening, trying to understand a person, and, at the end, being able to confront issues and have courage."

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Considering political involvement from a practical perspective, Laura feels that, depending on the environment in which social workers practice, "they can or cannot be" politically involved. However, if social workers aren't working in "a nonprofit or bound by funding, I hope they would be [politically involved] and generally think they are." Personally, Laura's political involvement was spurred by witnessing the "mean-spiritedness of people", where, upon reflection, she realizes she "had to get mad as hell to get this passionate. Anger brings energy as long as you channel it correctly."

John Steele, MSW

Master of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University
Ph.D., Catholic University

Previous Elected Position: Mayor of Cleveland, North Carolina



Motivation to work in the political arena:

After an opening among the Town Board of Commissioners, John was encouraged to run for the vacancy and was elected. He served as a Commissioner of Cleveland from 2001 to 2009. In November of 2009, John ran for the position of Mayor of Cleveland and won, following his two year term to run again in the November 2011 elections, where his community re-elected him as Mayor. He will not seek re-election after his term expires in December of 2013. Born and raised in Cleveland, it is fitting that John serves as Mayor to the town he calls home. He enjoys being a visible presence in the community, making sure to reach out to residents, both new and old, actively demonstrating his care and concern for each community member. In addition to typical Mayoral responsibilities, John also takes his care for his community to schools, sharing his experiences with students, hoping to inspire future political and community engagement from the upcoming generation in an effort to best serve his town.

"If you don't ask questions and take action, nothing will happen."

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

According to John, social work prepares practitioners to work with others, consider their needs, and be conscious of differences in ethnicities and cultures through its strong emphasis on seeking cultural competence. Social work, in addition to his experiences world-wide, has helped John develop an acute understanding of socialization, extended groups and how "they intersect, in terms of making decisions about community and working together." Additionally, social workers are well trained in community and social action. For John, "politics is social action" and "unless you ask questions and take action, nothing will happen." Locally, John's long history of social work practice in the United States Army and Air Force, Children's Services, Community Organizing at the military level, and Home Health & Hospice have all prepared him to serve his community as a consultant, facilitator, and catalyst, where social work practice with groups has been "invaluable" in his political service to Cleveland.

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

In discussing politically active social workers, John feels social workers should be politically involved because "it helps our profession." To elaborate, John describes the misconceptions about the profession and how politically involved social workers can help dismantle some of those myths. Additionally, John has seen the value of political action manifest gradually, but evidently through changes spearheaded by the Civil Rights movement, where riding on the bus and seeing diversity today is an example of a change that resulted from the work and investment of politically active individuals and groups. Now, John is using the skills from his diverse social work résumé to breathe his passion for social change into budding social workers at Appalachian State University where he is an adjunct professor in the Department of Social Work.

Tom Stevens, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Previously Elected Position: Mayor of Hillsborough, NC, elected in 2005 and successfully ran for re-election six times



Motivation to work in the political arena:

During college, Tom spent time teaching and working with kids, and after graduation he became a pre-school teacher. Following teaching, Tom worked in group homes, and with those experiences realized he wanted to work with families as a family therapist. With that new direction in mind, Tom earned his MSW and enjoyed a twenty-year career in mental health and human services as a therapist. He also worked in various program director roles, and spent twelve years as a family service agency executive director, all while being very involved in his community and local non-profits. However, he took a sabbatical after which launching his own business as a Leadership Consultant. Working from home, Tom realized although he lived in downtown Hillsborough, he “missed being involved in the community because [he] was so involved with [his] business.” As a result of feeling disconnected from his community, Tom decided to run for Mayor, “really to get involved with the community.” He won the election by thirty-nine votes and is currently serving his fourth term as Mayor of Hillsborough. Despite having been less politically involved previously, Tom has deftly managed the “very steep learning curve to learn how things are done and know the people.” Currently, he serves his community by chairing Council meetings where he works to “set a tone of collaboration,” representing his town at various events, and ultimately, being “a cheerleader” for his community.

“We’re talking about some of the most fundamental aspects of community and what impact we have on quality of lives. Issues social work grapples with far transcend provision of social services. ”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

Tom has been able to draw heavily on social work principles as a Mayor. As an individual who often serves as the face of his community, social work has trained him to have “respect for collaboration and working together” in addition to building rapport with his constituents by helping him consider “the dignity of each individual regardless of their station in life.” This sincere respect for all members of his community also serves Tom in his service in that he grounds much of his work in Systems Theory, where he strives to “help people improve their lives” by examining “how systems influence people and how people work as a group.” Tom used much of these skills and principles in his work as a family therapist, but he feels that it is “much the same for communities. Systems Theory, Theory of Change, giving people opportunities to participate, all have roots in social work.” Overall, Tom feels the true “strength of social work is a much stronger appreciation of inclusion, diversity, and human behavior in the social environment.”

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Tom believes social workers should seek political involvement, stating “As should all citizens.” From his perspective as an elected official, Tom realizes that “for the most part, a lot of folks don’t pay attention to politics—the reality is, it’s just a few people who tend to get involved and those voices make a real difference.” He encourages everyone, social workers included, to “get involved in a way to advance what is good for their community.”

Edith Wiggins, MSW

Master of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Previous Elected Position: Chapel Hill-Carrboro Board of Education
Member, Chapel Hill Town Council, Member

First African American Vice Chancellor and Dean of Student Affairs at UNC



Motivation to work in the political arena:

Edith has a rich history of political activity, but recalls her motivation to run for elected office began with concerns around school issues, particularly redistricting and how it would affect her children. She took her concerns to School Board meetings where she felt, in addition to racism, the real issue for parents opposition to redistricting was that they “did not feel in control. It was not a family decision so people did not like it.” Edith’s attendance at meetings allowed her to witness how the School Board dealt with issues around school overcrowding, underutilization of some schools, and racial balance. She saw how the School Board had to discuss and grapple with those issues and thought “I can do this.” With “overwhelming and enthusiastic support” from her community, Edith ran for a position on the School Board and won, serving two terms. In addition to her service to Chapel Hill-Carrboro Schools, Edith was also appointed to the Chapel Hill Town Council, and afterwards, ran for a position on the Town Council twice, winning both times. Serving in a highly politicized environment, Edith relied on advice from a former School Board colleague, Ed Caldwell, who advised her to remember that “the issues are never black or white, good or bad, up or down — your job is going to be choosing the right shade of gray.” Overall, Edith served her community with at least 17 years of public service.

“Some issues you are very psychologically and emotionally involved in, they tug at your core values and beliefs and you have to make your way through the maze of others’ values and beliefs.”

What social work brings to the table that is unique or needed in the political arena:

For Edith, social work was “invaluable” during her time as an elected official and was even part of her School Board campaign platform. Social work is “people oriented and training is in empathy, listening, understanding, and not being judgmental.” This training was critical in helping Edith serve as a balanced official, who invested much time and work in service for her community, with both support and opposition from constituents. Social work helped Edith navigate relationships with fellow Council Members, where she was able to use her skills to better understand her colleagues and appreciate that they had “different points of view, not bad or wrong points of view, just different.” This skill to meet others where they are, while striving to examine issues from a systems perspective helped Edith serve, realizing that “a lot of systems are operating on all of us in our day-to-day lives, nothing is isolated.”

Why should social workers become politically engaged?

Edith feels social workers should be politically involved, but understands that they are often overworked and underpaid, leaving them little time or energy to expend elsewhere. But for those who are in a position to be involved, Edith reminds them “it doesn’t always mean running for office and serving on boards. You can start with lesser involvement — community involvement, education and awareness — get your feet wet.” She also feels that if social workers want to solve problems they “must be willing to act — you can analyze, think, and understand, but nothing will change if you don’t act.”

Edith Wiggins passed away in 2021. [Learn more about her life and social work career here.](#)

Additional Resources and Information

North Carolina Resources for Political Involvement

North Carolina State Board of Elections

Guidelines for running for elected office at Local, State, and National Levels

<https://www.ncsbe.gov/>

North Carolina Democratic Party

Official website with access to local parties and ways to become involved

<https://www.ncdp.org/>

North Carolina Republican Party

Official website with access to local parties and ways to become involved

<https://www.nc.gop/>

North Carolina Libertarian Party

Official website with access to local parties and ways to become involved

<https://www.lpnc.org/>

Institute of Political Leadership

“The Institute of Political Leadership is a multi-partisan, non-profit educational institution formed to improve the quality of political leadership in North Carolina at the state and local levels. IOPL develops the political skills of North Carolinians with potential to be the state's future political leaders.” <https://iopl.org/>

Leadership North Carolina

“Leadership North Carolina (LNC) works with state luminaries to improve North Carolina's quality of life through visionary hands-on programming that integrates the areas of economic development, education, environment, government, and health and human services. Through six two-and-a-half-day sessions held in locations from the mountains to the coast, LNC participants gain knowledge and build networks that they can leverage personally, professionally, and for the benefit of the state and its people.” <https://leadershipnc.org/>

Lillian's List

“Lillian's List of NC is a statewide community of individuals who work to recruit, train, promote and support pro-choice Democratic women running for public office in North Carolina. We are modeled after EMILY's List and provide financial, strategic, and political support to women serving in the state legislature and the Council of State. We also strategically recruit new candidates committed to reproductive freedom and equality for women.” <https://lillianslist.org/>

About NASW-NC

Located in historic Oakwood in downtown Raleigh, NASW-NC is a 501C(6) administrative unit of the National Association of Social Workers. Developed in 1955, the Chapter currently has five full time and two part time staff and serves over 4,800 members. NASW-NC's membership is composed of MSWs, BSWs, and students who represent the social work profession in a variety of capacities throughout the state. NASW-NC works diligently to enhance each social worker's professional experience by:

- Creating innovative resources like the Practice Area Networks, and New Professionals webpage to meet the growing and changing needs of the profession
- Providing advocacy on behalf of social work and social workers, and communicating real time legislative updates to keep members informed regarding policy and how it will impact the profession
- Organizing and hosting a variety of professional development and continuing education opportunities such as Local Program Units, the annual Fall and Ethics Conferences, and Licensure Exam Preparation Sessions

In addition to such benefits, NASW-NC also offers its membership various leadership and networking opportunities through volunteer service on the:

- Board of Directors
- Legislative Committee
- Membership Committee
- Ethics Committee
- Political Action for Candidate Endorsement (PACE) Committee

NASW-NC is committed to fulfilling its mission of being "experts and leaders in creating and sustaining systemic change through ethical social work practice." NASW-NC works toward this by offering the aforementioned resources as well as representing social work through participation in statewide coalitions, committees and task forces, and by building relationships with numerous departments within state government, all with the goal of advancing and protecting the social work profession.

*For more information on the benefits of joining NASW-NC, feel free to contact Valerie Arendt, Executive Director of NASW-NC at (919)-828-9650 or by email at varendt.naswnc@socialworkers.org.