

Role of Government, Social Policy, and Social Work

BACKGROUND

Since the colonial beginnings of this country, government has been involved in addressing social problems. As a reaction to the strong central authority of European monarchies from which the founders fled or rebelled, they favored a theory of negative government, meaning the less government, the better. This preference for limited government responsibility for social services led Jansson (2001) to label the United States a "reluctant welfare state" as a way of distinguishing it from the traditional European welfare states. Despite this obvious and strong preference for private and individual solutions, government has mitigated the fallout from an unregulated economy and protected disadvantaged populations. As far back as the early 1700s, Massachusetts's colonists received aid from the general treasury to care for sick and displaced people (Trattner, 1999). Although government assistance goes back to our earliest beginnings, there has always been a struggle over how much government should be involved in helping cure the social ills of the nation.

An infamous instance of the hands-off approach is found in the "Pierce Veto." In the 1850s, Franklin Pierce vetoed legislation that would have designated federal lands to be used to establish psychiatric hospitals. Pierce vetoed the legislation because he feared that the federal government would become the "great almoner" to poor people (Pumphrey & Pumphrey, 1967). He did not want to set an "untenable precedent and draw the federal government into an inappropriate and unconstitutional relationship with the nation's needy" (Hall, 2004, p. 1).

Trends and countertrends addressed the most extreme dimensions of poverty, inequal-

ity, and oppression. In the early years of the 20th century, the Progressive Era tempered the harshness of the free market economy and protected the most vulnerable people. The Roaring Twenties returned the country to a time of limited government involvement. This was exemplified by the Hoover administration, which refused to support government intervention into the serious hardship experienced by people at the beginning of the Great Depression.

Ultimately, the Great Depression and response of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal administration in the 1930s firmly established the responsibility of the federal government to ameliorate a capitalistic system. During the subsequent 40 years, the presidential leadership of both parties further established and expanded at the federal level rights of citizenship that included new social, political, and economic benefits.

Leadership by the federal government in promoting an equality-of-opportunity social agenda peaked in the Kennedy-Johnson era of the 1960s. More socially progressive legislation was passed in the 1960s than at any time in U.S. history, and even continued under the Nixon administration. President Nixon instituted block grants to the states, as part of a "new federalism" without abdicating federal leadership, and instituted Title XX support for a range of social programs. Nixon supported the "federalization" of categorical welfare entitlements eventually enacted as Supplemental Security Income, or SSI, benefits. Finally, he proposed the federal takeover of Aid to Families with Dependent Children and introduced national health insurance legislation that would have extended Medicare- and Medic-

aid-like health coverage to new categories of citizens.

Although the administrations of Presidents Ford and Carter tampered little with social programs and priorities, the "stagflation" during the 1970s led to increasing calls for limits on taxes and on social spending at both the federal and state levels and a shift from universal to selective approaches to services. Concurrently, public hostility toward poor people and other marginalized groups was captured by the republican party's appeals to the "silent majority" or those who were unwilling participants in government intervention on behalf of these groups.

The Reagan and Bush administrations in the 1980s even more vigorously promoted an ideology of individualism and privatization, challenged many established entitlements, and scaled down the government role in "interfering" with the marketplace and corporate profits. Supply-side economics and tax policies forced real cuts in social program spending, a reversal of social program priorities, and efforts to deregulate businesses. The gap between rich and poor increased dramatically. Both administrations continued the concept of a "safety net" supplemented by private charity for meeting the needs of the "truly needy." Although this safety net was selective, the administrations still considered government as the provider of last resort, and there was no attempt to remove federal protection for special groups, such as abused and neglected children.

President Bill Clinton's victory in 1992 did not lead to a return to the philosophy on which the New Deal was based. Instead, Clinton, a neo-liberal Democrat, announced that the "era of big government is over." Consequently, he signed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (P.L. 104-193), which limited entitlement to public assistance for children and their families that the Roosevelt administration had established in 1935 with the passage of the Social Security Act. The Clinton administration restricted government provision and reduced record-setting deficits that had deepened during the Reagan-Bush years.

Both parties concurred that government should be reduced in size and scope. In the

1994 national elections, candidates supporting further limitations on government won the majority of congressional seats for the first time in 40 years. A majority of state governors was also elected on a platform of less government and lower taxes. These newly elected leaders sought to curtail the federal government in social program guarantees and funding, in protecting vulnerable populations, in restricting monitoring of business and investments, and in promoting affirmative action and other equity programs. At the same time they sought a greater social control role for government in shaping how families, and women in particular, may behave and in restricting who may come to this country and the rights they could exercise while in residence.

In the 2000 election, George W. Bush described himself as a "compassionate conservative." His social welfare policies were similar to those of his father's and Reagan's with the further elaboration of privatizing social services programs, an emphasis on faith-based initiatives, and profit-making social services programs.

In the early years of the 21st century attacks on the role of the federal government have grown from a preference for limited federal involvement to view recipients of services in ways that are antithetical to social work values in several ways: There is a shift from blaming victims to punishing them. The category of "undeserving poor" has expanded to include almost everyone, even those formerly protected, such as children, veterans, elderly people, and people with mental and physical illnesses. Users of public resources are subject to greater social control measures. Consumers of both market and social services are granted fewer real protections and are simply admonished to "let the buyer beware." Stereotypical views of personal characteristics or behaviors of certain groups by virtue of their racial, ethnic, or citizenship status (in the form of acts of racism, ageism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia) are justified under the guise of returning to "a supposed" normalcy or "survival of the fittest."

Consistent with this social agenda are economic tenets that include spending cuts and tax breaks for upper-income groups coupled

with balanced budget legislation, shifts of minimum programs back to the states without any entitlement provisions, heavy deregulation of industry, the lifting of consumer and environmental protections, and mandates for personal responsibility legislation.

Results of national elections in the first decade of the 21st century reflect seriously divided public opinion over the role of government. Public policy is the dominant variable in determining the nature of social work practice, and it is profoundly affected by government policy. Although social agencies and social work professionals can help shape policies and practices, the nature of the services delivery system and the legitimacy of social work as a profession is established by public social policy. Changes in government policies affect clients, their eligibility, and their ability to obtain benefits and services. In conclusion, restructuring and limiting government responsibility has profoundly altered the availability and the delivery of social work services and the role and status of social work as a profession.

ISSUE STATEMENT

Advances in science and technology, food production, public health, worker safety, and the environment have resulted in improvements in the quality of life undreamed of in the past. At the same time, dislocations and problems that have accompanied many of these changes have caused considerable misery and inequities for many people and communities. From Franklin D. Roosevelt to Jimmy Carter, the electorate chose representatives who viewed government as a mediating structure that modified the vagaries and inequities found in the marketplace. This view was accompanied by ideologies to create equality of opportunity to fulfill the vision of the United States of America as an open, pluralistic, caring, and inclusive society.

From 1935 to the late 1970s, federal government efforts moved in the direction of sharing the benefits of economic growth among its citizens, moderating the harshness of an unregulated economy, and protecting vulnerable

people. During this period, government has fulfilled this by

- regulation and oversight
- designing and funding programs created specifically to meet its policy goals
- stimulating the economy through industrial, taxation, and other fiscal policies
- redistributing the wealth of the society through the tax system.

However, regressive "Reaganomics" interrupted the progressive ideals of the government. Recent administrations have replaced fundamental values of the New Deal with their own agendas of privatization, personal responsibility, corporate welfare, and faith-based and profit-making social services.

The combination of severe cuts in funding of social programs to provide tax cuts for the wealthiest citizens, deregulation of legal rights and protections, and devolution of programs to states or private corporations with less funding and little or no regulation and standards with very short notice can cause great harm to our society and especially to its most vulnerable populations.

Since the beginning of social work as a profession and the inception of NASW, two basic assumptions have been made: The social ills of the nation and its citizens need public attention, resources, and solutions, and government has a major role and responsibility to meet human needs. Moreover, there has been increasing recognition that major shifts in the structure and functions of society, including demographic, economic, health, and family factors require universal social welfare benefits and services.

The George W. Bush administration saw problems as being individual in origin rather than social or environmental in nature, and too often the etiology of problems in society is being characterized in moral, racial and cultural, or intellectual terms. The influence of social, economic, or political factors on community and family life has been minimized or ignored. At the beginning of the 21st century, government is no longer regarded as an instrument of problem solution; instead, in some quarters, by some factions, it is portrayed as

the problem or an exacerbating factor of the problem. Although state governments have been given more responsibility and opportunities to address these issues with fewer resources, there are yet more requirements that states meet the needs of vulnerable and oppressed populations.

POLICY STATEMENT

It is the position of NASW that federal, state, and local governments must have a role in developing policies and programs that expand opportunities, address social and economic justice, improve the quality of life of all people in this country, with special emphasis on oppressed groups, and enhance the social conditions of the nation's communities. NASW reaffirms its commitment to the promotion of the positive role of federal, state, and local governments as guarantors of the social safety net and as the mechanisms by which people through their elected representatives can ensure equitable and accountable policies to address

- curbing the excesses of a free market economy
- entitlements to assist in the elimination of poverty
- access to universal comprehensive health care
- standards for public services
- enabling citizen participation in the development and implementation of social programs
- taxation that is progressive and fair and promotes a reduction of poverty
- an income floor for working poor people through earned income tax credits and other mechanisms
- adequate federal minimum wage laws indexed to annual cost-of-living increases
- standards and laws for the protection of workers in the workplace
- standards and laws for the protection of vulnerable populations

- product safety standards
- access to legal services
- commitment to full employment
- adequate and affordable housing
- assurance of adequate public education and educational standards for all schools
- a justice system rooted in law and administered impartially
- laws that protect and maintain the fragile, natural environment
- ensuring the civil rights of citizens and noncitizen residents, and the right of all to marry
- nondiscrimination and affirmative action
- international initiatives based on collaborative and cooperative relationships with other nations.

The key to accomplishing these policy goals is a view of government as an embodiment of and by the people, rather than an entity above and apart from its citizens. This policy calls for a renewed commitment to civic responsibility by an informed community through participation in democratic forums. This policy can be achieved with civic and political participation by all, and with campaign finance reform that levels the political playing field. It demands open debate on a wide variety of policies and programs while maintaining the basic functions listed. As necessary, such a process would support the reform of government when it is consistent with the social work value base.

NASW reaffirms the essential role of government. The role of the federal government is to ensure uniform standards, adequate resources, equal protection under the law, monitoring and evaluating of outcomes, and provision of technical assistance to state and local governments. NASW also recognizes the role of state and local governments in social programs. State governments are often in better positions to understand the needs of the people in those states. As a part of a national community, states must work together to implement a federal policy that supports the well-being of the peo-

ple of this nation. Thus, social programs are most effective when there is consistency in federal standards and guidelines with adequate funding and accountability mechanisms for states and localities to administer programs in ways that are best adapted to meet the needs of people, examining the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of programs necessary to ensure the success of that role. Laws, regulations, and program guidelines need constant and thorough review. NASW can provide significant leadership in evaluating existing programs and in designing and recommending new ones that advance the goals of the social policy it has reaffirmed.

NASW believes that social workers can be effective at all levels of and in many roles in government. Social workers can fulfill roles as elected officials and leaders in government and as administrators in agencies. The recent reintroduction of block grants is an opportunity for social workers to support the collaborative efforts of government and the people. This policy asserts that government should actively

and creatively guide, negotiate, and participate in cooperative efforts with nongovernmental organizations to provide programs that expand and support opportunities, address social and economic justice, and improve the quality of life for all people.

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Policy statement approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly, August 2005. This policy supersedes the policy statement on Role of Government approved by the Delegate Assembly in August 1996. For further information, contact the National Association of Social Workers, 750 First Street, NE, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20002-4241. Telephone: 202-408-8600 or 800-638-8799; e-mail: press@naswdc.org