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Shifting social worker attitudes toward homelessness: an MSW training program evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Homeless agencies rely on social workers to fulfill a critical role in housing first service delivery yet social worker recruitment and retention for high-demand fields are challenging. A consortium of five Masters of Social Work (MSW) programs located in Southern California participated in a student training program to enhance field placements in the homeless sector. The Homeless Social Work Education Program (“the Program”) provides a homeless sector-specific curriculum designed to reverse misunderstood causes of homelessness and improve comfort affiliating with homeless. This article presents the Program’s evaluation findings at the end of Year 2. Over the two-year period, 28 students completed a pre- and post-evaluation which included the Attitudes Toward Homelessness Inventory (ATHI). The results showed a significant student improvement in the outlook towards the homeless population. The Homeless Social Work Education Program may offer a model that will address workforce deficits in the homeless social service sector by improving attitudes towards working with this population.

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Introduction

Social workers are trained to promote social justice and work with vulnerable populations and are well situated to work in systems responsible for addressing homelessness (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Yet as homelessness has increased nationwide for the fourth consecutive year, with estimates of over 110,500 chronically homeless individuals in the United States (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2021), relatively few licensed social workers are employed within homeless services (Larkin et al., 2016). In 2016, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare launched a “Grand Challenge” initiative that including ending homelessness as a priority area (Henwood et al., 2015). To align with this priority, many schools of social work have added curricular content to better train social workers to serve homeless populations (Henwood & Akaynian, 2020) with the Council on Social Work Education releasing a curriculum guide to help support schools in this effort.

A lack of specific content on homelessness within master’s programs can result in trained professional social workers demonstrating microaggressions and bias toward people experiencing homelessness (Budescu et al., 2021; Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2017). Further, a curriculum that focuses solely on micro-level practices such as teaching clinical interventions that can be implemented within homeless

services (e.g. motivational interviewing, critical-time intervention, etc.), may overlook mezzo and macro programs and interventions that are needed to address homelessness (Reisch, 2016). Indeed, master of social work students who concentrated on macro as opposed to micro practice are more confident in competencies related to increased social action frequency (Apgar, 2021). Focusing only on micro practice could also perpetuate stigmatizing attitudes that homelessness is rooted in a person’s individual shortcoming rather than systems failures (Belcher & DeForge, 2012) as exposure to homelessness for Masters of Social Work (MSW) students through field placements alone has not been found to result in consistent positive attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness (Aberson & McVean, 2008).

Specialized homelessness training in other professions, however, has been shown to change attitudes towards homelessness. For example, training for students, faculty, and staff in various educational programs have been shown to improve attitudes towards advocating for social change with homeless populations (Buchanan et al., 2004; Lery et al., 2020; Siegel et al., 2020; Wisheart et al., 2013; Zha et al., 2020). Further, a study of medical students by O’Toole et al. (1999) showed positive attitude shifts in caring for underserved populations when volunteering in a homeless shelter. Although there are few best practices on how best to reduce stigmatizing attitudes

particularly around homelessness (Schneider & Remillard, 2013,) the broader literature suggests that exposure to the population (Alexander & Link, 2003) along with increased knowledge of proximal and distal contributing factors to homelessness (Belcher & DeForge, 2012) may result in more favorable attitudes towards working with this population.

Efforts to combine social work field placement service experiences with educational courses have been encouraged for social work students to expand knowledge and skills (Aguiniga & Bowers, 2018; De Marco & Kretzschmar, 2019) including for those students placed in homeless services placements, (Watson et al., 2021). To our knowledge, however, there has not been an evaluation of such a program and its impact on attitudes towards homelessness. The Homeless Social Work Education Program, (hereafter “Program”), which started in 2017 and represents a collaborative effort across five area social work programs, promotes the homeless services sector as an appealing option for employment by combining a year-long training and field placement for MSW students (Gallup et al., 2020). The program grew out of a workforce development need, due to the area having the largest unsheltered population in the U.S. In recent years, billions of additional dollars have been raised to address homelessness crisis including the passage of local tax increases specifically for homeless services. Despite increased funding and efforts to address the homeless crisis, newly created jobs in the sector are not being filled fast enough leaving a workforce deficit.

The Program delivered a seven-month curriculum to 2nd year MSW interns who were placed in homeless services, permanent supportive housing, and rapid rehousing agencies. Students from across the 5 social work programs met together for a half-day training led by homelessness sector experts once a month. The seminar topics were designed to achieve micro,

mezzo, and macro learning goals for working and leading effectively in the homeless sector. The curriculum covered homeless systems and programs, state policies on healthcare and homelessness, racial equity and development, leadership, career, and personal development designed to combat negative attitudes toward the population and work in homeless services. A more detailed description of the Program can be found (Gallup et al., 2020). The goal of the current evaluation was to examine the impact of the Program on attitudes towards homeless using a validated instrument.

Methodology

The Pilot Program was delivered to two cohorts of MSW students over two academic years, 2018–2019 and 2019–2020. Eleven service providers of various sizes hosted a total of 28 interns; 15 in year 1 and 13 in year 2. The students represented five university social work programs located in Southern California and completed 13,960 h of service in the homeless sector. The number of students from each of the participating universities varies year to year based on the field placements. While 28 interns participated in the Program, 27 completed both pre and post evaluations.

In order to evaluate the impact of the training, the Attitudes Toward Homeless Inventory (ATHI) was administered each year using a pre- and post-test survey design. The ATHI, an 11-item Likert scale questionnaire, is a validated tool for measuring changes in beliefs about homelessness (Buchanan et al., 2004). ATHI items constitute four subscales measuring the following qualities within respondents: belief that homelessness has societal causes, belief that homelessness is a solvable problem, willingness to affiliate with homeless people, and belief that homelessness is caused by personal characteristics as outlined in Table 1. Each subscale is positively

Table 1. Attitudes Toward Homelessness Inventory subscale.

(ATHI) Subscales	Items
Belief that homelessness has societal causes*	“Recent government cutbacks in housing assistance for the poor may have made the homeless problem in this country worse” (R) “The low minimum wage in this country virtually guarantees a large homeless population” (R) “Recent government cutbacks in welfare have contributed substantially to the homeless problem in this country” (R)
*A high numerical score on this subscale indicates a respondent believes societal factors are more likely to be important causes of homelessness.	“I would feel comfortable eating a meal with a homeless person” (R) “I feel uneasy when I meet homeless people”
†Willingness to affiliate with homeless people	“Homeless people had parents who took little interest in them as children” (R) “Most circumstances of homelessness in adults can be traced to their emotional experiences in childhood” (R)
†A high numerical score on this subscale indicates a respondent is more open to affiliating with persons experiencing homelessness.	“Most homeless persons are substance abusers” (R) “Rehabilitation programs for the homeless are too expensive to operate”
Belief homelessness is caused by personal characteristics‡	“There is little that can be done for people in homeless shelters except to see that they are comfortable and well fed” “A homeless person cannot really be expected to adopt a normal lifestyle”
‡A high numerical score on this subscale indicates a respondent believes personal characteristics are less likely to be causes of homelessness.	
Belief that homelessness is a solvable problem§	
§A high numerical score on this subscale indicates a respondent believes solutions to homelessness are more likely to exist.	

All items were rated 1 to 6 in terms of agreement with 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = unsure but probably agree, 4 = unsure but probably disagree, 5 = disagree, and 6 = strongly disagree. (R) indicates scoring reversed for this item.

Table 2. Descriptive subscale results of the ATHI, Year 1 ($n = 15$).

ATHI subscale/total	Pre-program Mean	Post-program Mean	Change
Belief that homelessness has societal causes	4.79	4.89	+0.10
Willingness to affiliate with homeless people	4.71	5.10	+0.39
Belief homelessness is caused by personal characteristics	3.00	2.60	-0.40
Belief that homelessness is a solvable problem	4.60	5.00	+0.40
ATHI total score	49.58	53.07	+3.49

Table 3. Results of the ATHI, Year 2 ($n = 12$).

ATHI subscale/total	Pre-program mean	Post-program mean	Change	<i>P</i> value
Belief that homelessness has societal causes	1.69	2.61	+0.92	<.01
Willingness to affiliate with homeless people	4.92	5.63	+0.71	<.01
Belief homelessness is caused by personal characteristics	4.36	3.92	-0.44	.09
Belief that homelessness is a solvable problem	4.83	4.97	+0.14	.32
Total score	55.25	59.42	+4.17	<.05

correlated with positive attitudes toward persons experiencing homelessness, with the exception of the subscale measuring personal characteristics, which is inversely correlated. ATHI's total possible scores range from 11 to 66. Kingree and Daves (1997) reported the reliability of the scale to be .71 with a sample size of 383 with subscale reliability .73, .65, .72, and .60, respectively. Construct validity has been demonstrated for the ATHI by showing that its 4 subscales correlate with one another and to demographic variables in expected ways (Buchanan et al., 2004; Kingree & Daves, 1997).

The baseline survey was administered via a Qualtrics link that students completed at the first training in September before the curriculum began and the follow-up survey was administered in the same way at the program graduation in April. No other measures or demographic information was collected. For year 1, the downloaded Qualtrics summary data was retained and is presented descriptively with change scores between pre- and post-training. For year 2, individual records from Qualtrics were retained that allowed us to run a paired sample t-test using SPSS.

Results

Program participants ($n = 15$) of Year 1 demonstrated shifts in beliefs that were correlated with more positive attitudes toward persons experiencing homelessness as demonstrated through the pre and post ATHI scores. The subscale results of the ATHI showed changes in all areas (Table 2). In addition, Table 2 shows the average total ATHI score rose by 3.49 points from 49.58 points at the beginning of the program to 53.07 points at its conclusion.

Year 2 ATHI results ($n = 12$; Table 3) also demonstrate shifts in beliefs that were correlated with more positive attitudes toward persons experiencing homelessness. In particular, a significant favorable change was ($p < .01$) in two subscales: respondents' belief that homelessness has societal causes, and

respondents' willingness to associate with persons experiencing homelessness. While shifts in the other two subscales were not significant (respondents' likelihood to believe that homelessness is caused by personal characteristics ($p = .09$) and respondents' belief that homelessness is a solvable problem ($p = .32$), the mean total ATHI score rose from 55.25 at the beginning of the program to 59.42 at its end, with a significance of $< .05$.

Discussion

While the ATHI has not been previously utilized to evaluate a social work curriculum, positive changes in the ATHI scores at the conclusion of the Program's Social Work Cohorts for 2019 and 2020 were observed. When focusing on year 2, we note that despite a small sample, a significant change was found in respondents' belief that homelessness has societal causes, and respondents' willingness to associate with persons experiencing homelessness. Taken together, this may suggest that respondents may now be more empathetic to people experiencing homelessness. We did not observe, however, a significant change in respondents' belief that homelessness is a solvable problem, which is a message the training was designed to instill. On the one hand, this may suggest that the training needs to be changed to better highlight solutions. On the other hand, this may reflect that students developed a better understanding of the complexity of the problem and assessed solving homelessness to be an ongoing challenge. It is noteworthy, however, that the magnitude of change on this item for year 1 was higher than in year 2 (+0.4 versus +0.1), although it is unclear whether this was a significant change given our inability to run a paired sample t-test using year 1 data.

Comparing the two cohorts does raise several questions. First, we note that the magnitude of change in year 1 appears to be less than in year 2 with subscale that homelessness is a solvable problem being an

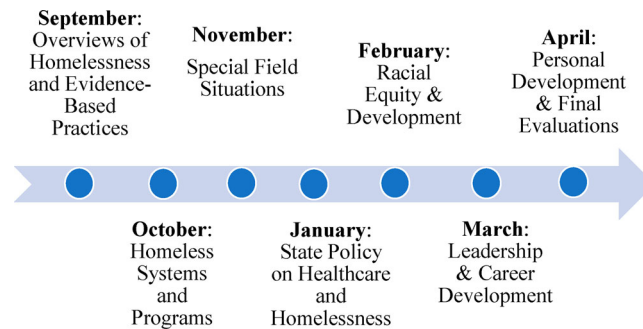


Figure 1.

exception. It is unclear whether this is somehow reflective of differences in how the training was delivered and/or the result of individual differences in the cohorts. With regard to the latter, year 1 students appeared at baseline to more highly endorse that homelessness has societal causes and endorse less the idea that homelessness is caused by personal characteristics than year 2 students (4.8 vs 1.6 and 3.0 vs 4.4, respectively). It is also interesting to note that these social work cohorts had more positive attitudes towards homeless people overall at baseline than what Buchanan et al. (2004) reported for primary care residents. These findings suggest that training programs need to be tailored to different professions but also could be tailored to individuals within specific professions. Moving forward, this program's facilitators plan to look at baseline scores in order possibly make adjustments in the curriculum.

Limitations

There are several limitations to consider when interpreting the findings of this study. First, students are coming from different universities. While MSW programs are accredited by the same national body, their curriculum varies and even students at the same university can have different concentrations and coursework that may have impacted attitudes differently. Second, students were placed in different agencies that provide different exposure to organization cultures and homeless sub-populations served, which is not accounted for in the study's design. The survey data may also be skewed due to the fact students' self-chosen to intern in a homeless agency, thus the observed attitude changes may not in fact be representative of all MSW students. Social desirability may have also influenced how students responded. Another limitation of the evaluations is the size of the sample. Both cohorts' sample sizes were less than 20 individuals and may not adequately represent the total population (Costigan & Cox, 2001; Robinson, 2014). Finally, race, age, and gender were not taken into consideration in the analysis of the evaluations as these data were not collected. These

factors may or may not have contributed to the results of the ATHI score and results were not compared against a control group.

Conclusion

America is home to a large population of individuals experiencing homelessness, and there is a focus on addressing this social problem. Increased funding for homeless services is creating a workforce deficit as new jobs are created and the stigmas related to homelessness and working with those experiencing homelessness are strongly ingrained in society. Changing attitudes toward homeless and homeless services for social work students will not only likely increase the number of graduates entering the sector, but also have a long-term positive impact on how they deliver critical human service interventions. Continued evaluation of the program will provide information that can be used to determine if this model can effectively be used in working with other vulnerable populations or in different geographic areas. Furthermore, program evaluators will be following up with graduates of the program to determine if they are working with homeless and in what capacity. While this program is designed to increase career interest in the social work grand challenge of ending homelessness, the Program's graduating social workers will have experienced attitudes about homeless changes that will span their careers even if they do not work directly with people experiencing homelessness. A deeper inquiry into how the changes in attitudes influence the graduates' social work interventions is also needed in future evaluations.

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