

An Investigation into the Retooling, Relevance & Efficiency of the 21st Century Social Worker in Jamaica

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Abstract

To meet changing needs, particularly in a post-pandemic era, where the fields of social development, education, healthcare, and others have shifted toward evidence-informed practice, we must establish new research priorities and teaching innovations in social work that prepare and expand the workforce and that document, the value of social work professionals and social work interventions on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The purpose of this article is to investigate the retooling, relevance & efficiency of the 21st century social worker in Jamaica. Today's social workers must be willing to display their continuing commitment to both the cause and their clients. This must involve service to individuals and pursuit of extensive social reform. Considering this, Social Workers must give serious attention to the critical elements of innovation, research, advocacy, and self-care to advance their relevance, retooling and efficiency in these changing times.

Keywords: Social work practice; Retooling for social workers; Relevance of social worker post-covid; Efficiency of social workers

Introduction

Numerous inter-related ongoing developments have contributed to a significantly changed environment globally that will require establishing new research priorities and teaching innovations to prepare and expand the social work workforce for 21st century human service roles. These are: 1) socio-demographic shifts resulting in increased diversity of the population in countries worldwide, 2) increasingly interrelated global and local issues, and 3) the scale, speed, and dimensions of worldwide technological developments. The Jamaica Association for Social Workers has recognized that these unprecedented historic shifts in social work education, practice and research require urgent retooling of social work professionals to target the needs of the 21st century and to remain relevant and efficient today.

To meet changing needs, particularly in a post-pandemic era, where the fields of social development, education, healthcare, and others have shifted toward evidence-informed practice, we must establish new research priorities and teaching innovations in social work that prepare and expand the workforce and that document, the value of social work professionals and social work interventions on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Social work brings attention to psychosocial needs across people's life span and brings its focus on person-environment fit and use of a system's perspective. These hallmarks of social work preparation should place our professionals in a perfect position to assess and intervene in the social determinants of health care, to serve as supportive bridges between health care, social security and education settings and the community, and to support and sustain successful, healthy community living in this rapidly shifting environment. Our system should be able to provide social workers with opportunities to employ prevention-focused research and practice innovations to impact child health and socio-emotional development but is found lacking in more than one area.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the retooling, relevance & efficiency of the 21st century social worker in Jamaica. Today's social workers must be willing to display their continuing commitment to both the cause and their clients. This must involve service to individuals and pursuit of extensive social reform. Considering this, Social Workers

must give serious attention to the critical elements of innovation, research, advocacy, and self-care to advance their relevance, retooling and efficiency in these changing times.

What are the defined roles of a 21st century Social worker according to the Jamaica Social Worker's Association?

The predicament that surrounds the career of Social Work in Jamaica is mainly attributed to professional identity that seeks to influence recruitment, maintenance, and the understanding of the basic roles and to clarify its distinctiveness compared with Guidance counselors in schools. In a society like Jamaica, social workers are very much needed to support those affected by poverty, disabilities, from minority groups and those who experience social exclusion, including children that live and attend schools within volatile communities.

According to the JASW Website, social workers are seen as change agents in their communities and nation who help persons find positive ways forward through the challenges they face in order to build healthy, strong communities. Social workers are seen as case workers, clinical/health care, administrators, generalist, policy maker/lobbyist, educator, and community activists. The social workers are seen as liaison officers to families and other public, private and non-governmental organizations by offering support to the vulnerable in the communities at risks. It can be said that in our Jamaican context that some of our social workers serve in these capacities, but in other instances most of our social workers are not functioning in those capacities because of the perceptions individuals have of these professionals as just counselors only not according to what the roles that JASW had outlined. This

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profession is one in which individuals are called upon to be catalysts whose voices need to be heard and have passion of both community and nation building.

The National Association of Social Workers (United States of America) also mandates social workers to be change agents who seek to enhance human well-being and assist to meet the needs of people focusing and empowering those in society who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty. Their roles are similar to what is practiced in the Jamaican context and involve activities such as administration, advocacy, consultation, policy development and consultation, education, supervision, research and evaluation. The National Association of Social Worker Code of Ethics states “Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individual’s needs and social problems”.

Therefore, the Jamaica Social Worker Association and the National Association of Social Workers do have similar roles that are executed on a daily basis to ensure that whichever stakeholder group needs are addressed, it empowers people to rise above their challenging circumstance.

In addition, there are some barriers social workers may encounter when performing their roles. Forde (2019) stated that “trained social workers are suited to function in many different roles and under many different titles, the profession does not endorse individuals, not having had years of academic training in the field, assuming the title unto themselves.” In other words, it is a profession that is not supported by individuals who would not have had the necessary qualifications and training as well as the experience in the field while being given the position. This occupation is given to those who have been formally trained, have professionally practiced and hold internationally recognized values and competencies to carry out the job functions. This is seen as an uncomfortable distinction to make, in order to ensure quality control and maintain accountability as a result of those without the adequate training who have been referred to and thought of as social workers [1].

The second barrier that social workers have is that of mental illness which becomes more prevalent today. It is one that social workers may experience when they are taxed to find resources for persons who are not able to function successfully and are seen as harming themselves as well as others Social Work Degree Guide, 2021[2]. An example of this is with those who have schizophrenia, depression, Down’s syndrome and other forms of illnesses. This is where the social worker has to partner with agencies and sponsors in funding programmes to cater to the needs of these individuals and at times, there is not enough funds to support the mentally disabled community.

The third barrier would be that of governmental regulations. It is understood that the government has passed laws concerning the practice of social care and one of them is privacy to information. This is where cooperation between agencies and between caregivers and social workers may be difficult to achieve because they are not able to communicate in terms of having access to information from therapists and other professionals. If the social worker is not aware of new requirements coming from the government, it can be challenging in providing services to the clients.

Another barrier is that of minimal compensation. Palmer (2016) stated that “unfortunately social workers do not earn what they are worth. Many jobs in social work come with a low pay grade.” Based

on the job in which the professional serves, working for less pay can be emotionally draining for the individual seeing that they work with clients who have socio-emotional and psychological challenges. For those who are contracted to work as social workers, they would receive more compensation than those who are full time social workers in pensionable positions but on the other hand they would receive benefits such as travelling allowances, health insurance, etc.; especially if the workload becomes heavy and combined with a less salary, it can be frustrating for the individual [3].

The last barrier could be one of stress. It is not possible to have sessions with clients who are emotionally distressed and not allow it to rub off on the social worker. It is required for social workers to be compassionate at all times especially in the most hostile situations. Example of this is that if a social worker works with children and teens that just lost their parents and have no other form of family support can cause him or her to be emotionally distressed or drained. Although people may say to separate one’s personal life from their job, it is not easy to do so, because the social worker is expected to be responsible for the individual’s emotion and not to focus on their own.

What aspects of a Social Worker’s roles/job description need to be retooled?

Postulated that social workers are facing increasingly complex client needs during the pandemic. Due to the social distancing requirements, social workers have undergone transformative changes in practice with the rapid uptake of virtual technologies as a retooling method. A social worker can be described as a trained professional who provides enhancement to their client to obtain self- actualization; their focus is centered on the client’s holistic socio-psychological development. They provide counseling and suggestions for clients to make their own decisions in the counseling process. Retooling can be described as the process where social workers needs to be equipped with new or adapted tools to adjust, rebuild and to optimize all the resources available in a program of expertise [4]. Table 1

In what ways are Social Workers being efficient in a society like Jamaica?

Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse explained that in order to be efficient, Social Workers have to learn to identify, focus and develop the strengths of all individuals, groups and communities and thus promote their empowerment. Moore (1995) states that efficiency can be achieved only by improving the relationship between costs and outcomes. The author elaborated that for efficiency to be seen, Social Workers must examine how best to utilize their time, which clients should be served, how much time should be allocated to each family, child and others Moore.

Sulman, Savage and Way explained that “the adaptive skills needed for the restructured Social Work context should include: the creation of key roles for social work on the multidisciplinary team, pre-admission high-risk screening and discharge planning, high volume recording and the development of community partnerships.” Borders explained in her research that, ‘Greens and Keys and Paisley spoke eloquently to the need to update and reexamine, at greater depth, the developmental basis for the profession.’ Many Social Workers fail to perform the mandated services they are assigned to or required to do due to lack of training, innovation, diversity, extensive research, lack of resources and further education.

According to National Association of Social Workers (2012), all social workers need to dedicate time to their personal growth

Qualification/Experience	Job Title/Grade	Job Purpose	Key Responsibilities	Knowledge/Skills/Abilities
Broaden the Qualification band.	A name change to reflect who the social worker is. eg. Human Services Officer	Broaden the scope of job purpose to include other laws: International Laws.	Methods of record keeping has to change	Computer literate based on new dispensation. Zoom Sessions etc.
	Reclassify the grade to reflect the worker's expertise.	Redefine poor and destitute as the situation changes.	Methods of payment may have to change. Eg. bank transfers etc.	
		Establishing the Social Work Profession in Jamaica		
	With classification comes increased compensation	At one point having certain things constitute you as not being poor, now the poor owns devices, have access to internet etc.	Equip homes with devices.eg tablets etc.	
			Ways in which the social worker interacts with clients has to change	
	Crisis Intervention	Equip Social workers with the necessary techniques to help their client during a crisis	Social workers will be more effective in the prevention of their client's permanent damage and aid in restoring their mental status. Having this level of training will also prevent psychological trauma suddenly after a crisis	Having a course or maybe a program to train Social workers within this specific area.
	Direct Family Social Worker	To facilitate direct family contact	Social Worker will visit the family home not because of a child or children but to provide help and support to the family directly	Family Social workers are recognise as same in other countries but for Jamaica the focus is mainly on the children
				Additional title with requisite training
	Youth Developmental Social Work	Specialized skill training in youth social development	Social worker who work directly with youths, can also incorporate the community social aspects	This may be a another area to place a focus because the country is a youthful
	Safety and security	Training and regular updates on any unrest in communities in which they work	Agency within which they work can provide safety for social worker	Self-care, self-awareness

Table 1: Outlines areas for which retooling is needed.

and professional development to become and remain effective in addressing institutional issues. Being in a society like Jamaica, in order to be effective, the needs of the society have to be met and dealt with in an appropriate manner. National Association of Social Workers states that while social workers are likely to fall along a range from having little professional development to being knowledgeable and effective in some issues, growth and development is needed and is an ongoing process of continuous learning throughout one's career as a social worker [5].

Social Workers Being Trained To Provide Psychosocial Support to At-Risk Children

Thirty social workers from the Child Protection and Family Services Agency (CPFSA) are benefiting from training aimed at equipping them to provide psychosocial support to more than 6,500 at-risk children who are wards of the State. The course will build the capacity of social workers to respond to a child dealing with trauma, including carrying out psychological assessment and designing an intervention plan in keeping with the child's particular needs. Ms. Budhi said that equipping social workers in this way will also reduce the burden on the small team of psychologists who serve children in childcare facilities [6].

"This is a worthy cause as we seek to upgrade our social workers and ensure that social intervention in our society, in our school system and in our community is in good hands," he added. "The training of the CPFSA social workers forms a part of our Youth at Risk project that does not only boost the capacity of social workers in clinical social work but it also increases the capacity of caregivers to provide quality care

and support for the nation's children in private and public homes," she noted. Areas to be covered include approaches to clinical social work, child psychopathology, conflict management, human sexuality issues, dealing with grief and trauma, ethical and legal issues in social work and clinical counseling skills, and techniques for social workers.

Social Workers Stand Ready in the COVID-19 Fight

Over the past several months, with the growing pandemic around the coronavirus, the Jamaica Association of Social Workers (JASW) stated their concerns of how these developments might affect social workers and their clients. Where there is panic, fear, uncertainty – which we are most familiar with in our daily practice – social workers seek to apply our professional skills such as problem-solving, crisis intervention, and strengths utilization. In this, social workers support the nation in keeping peace and supporting solution-focused approaches to address the current situation.

As social workers, our mandate is to add important social value to the context in these times. Notwithstanding, it is also imperative that we ensure that we follow the precautions set by the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Health and Wellness for our individual health and well-being as we support the existing public policy as it relates to the pandemic and help to guide the participation of people in communities towards desired outcomes. The JASW also urges social workers, at this time more than ever, to practice self-care, which has always been identified as a necessary action for social workers who are themselves the main tool in social interventions.

As we engage in social-distancing and stay focused on our mandate of advocating for social justice, equity, and facilitating the empowerment of people. The JASW takes this opportunity to reflect on ways that the authorities can improve services for the vulnerable in our society in general and encourages individual social workers to reflect and advocate similarly [7].

Ways to Improve Service

Some points for reflection that would contribute to the improvement of the social and healthcare systems and reduce the burdens in times such as these include: providing support for families to adequately meet the needs of their children in 24-hour cycles, taking into account those who have recently been reintegrated into their families following state care and parents who depend on caregivers or schools to keep their children occupied during the day. This includes more robust community parenting support programmers operated by trained social workers, which could help parents improve their ability to care for their children and make home the best place for children to be.

Active Community Mobilization

The social-work perspective adds great value to the development plans of Jamaica, and as social workers, our role is to agitate for the changes that are needed to keep people at the center of development. This pandemic has reinforced for us what the profession has been advocating for many decades: the importance of community-based practice, localized interventions, and active community mobilization.

The training and experience of social workers allows us to identify and build on the strengths that lie in every challenging situation – strengths that form the foundation of a more empowered future beyond COVID-19. Jamaica should know that social workers stand confident and ready to continue to work to mitigate the existing gaps in service delivery and improve our practice to, ultimately, benefit the nation.

Social workers doing Assessment in West Kingston

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security, in collaboration with the Social Development Commission (SDC), deployed approximately 100 social workers in West Kingston, in June of 2021 to conduct a three-day social survey, following the recent operations by the security forces. According to the Permanent Secretary in the Labor Ministry, Alvin McIntosh, the objectives of the investigation is to assess the level of dislocation to families, damage to houses, business and property and loss of income arising from the operations. A number of residents in and around the affected areas are PATH beneficiaries, and as such, the survey sought to assess how these persons were affected.

The social workers also went into the West Kingston communities of Denham Town, Tivoli Gardens, Fletchers Land, Hannah Town and other areas. The exercise was carried out in response to social disparities affecting children, the elderly and persons from vulnerable groups [8].

In what ways are Social workers being relevant in the 21st century?

As a career, social work “has traditionally been looked to for leadership and support in altering conditions that impede human potential and dignity”. In order to remain relevant as a 21st century Social Worker, National Association of Social Workers explains that individual social workers have a responsibility to promote change within and among organizations, and at the societal level.

Relevancy calls for Social Workers to know and carry out the Code of Ethics set in order to survive in the 21st century and suggests that

Social Workers must have the knowledge and skills to carry out what is required; and the code of ethics basically states just what is needed to be done and more. The prelude to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics states that: “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.... Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice” National Association of Social Workers.

Social challenges have existed as far back as the first humans who lived on the earth. Even then, conditions such as, dysfunctional family, mental illness, pandemics, inequality, and abuse have been pervasive. The designated leaders of dignity and fairness executed their functions similarly to today's social workers. In fact, the bible character Joseph played the role of a Social Worker. He gathered wheat, wine, water, and barley harvest in preparation for the forecasted famine. When the famine came on the land, Joseph demonstrated social care towards, not only the Egyptians but also the Israelites. Joseph demonstrated distributive justice.

It is clear that though informal, the roles and functions of a social worker were established many centuries ago. Undoubtedly, the social worker will always be relevant as life is plagued with conditions that require social intervention. According to Bradford and our understanding of the social work profession begins with a deep appreciation of humans as social beings. People are social creatures who are in need of social care. They depend on one another to satisfy their needs [9].

Social workers are relevant in today's time of COVID-19 and beyond. Doctor Khadijah Williams and Eva Ford of the Jamaica Association of Social Workers in the Jamaica Gleaner stated that the training and experience of social workers allow them to identify and build on the strengths that lie in every challenging situation - strengths that form the foundation of a more empowered future beyond COVID-19. The pandemic has created a lot of uncertainty and worry for persons across the nation and in this; the social workers utilize their core competencies and skills to address social problems within the nation.

The article inferred that the relevance of the social worker in Jamaica in this post-pandemic era would support an “improvement of the social and healthcare systems and reduce the burdens in this time” this would be addressed through specialist social work designation. Increased hospitalization due to physical and mental health conditions could be addressed by the medical and hospital social worker, community social worker, criminal justice social worker, child, family and school social worker, psychiatric social worker, and the social worker in administration, policy, and research.

COVID -19 has created greater demands for school social workers, who are not only needed to help locate missing students but also help all students get resources to regain momentum both developmentally and academically to help students gain access to mental health services and grief counseling if needed. Many school social workers see the problems of the “lost year” as a larger opportunity to make schools more welcoming and less punitive so students and school communities can thrive. Social workers are focused on helping students, families, and teachers adjust after COVID-19 lockdowns and provide psychosocial information to help them to cope with the time of uncertainties.

Based on the needs that exist due to COVID-19, Social workers are indeed relevant in post pandemic era. The Jamaica Association of

Social Workers (JASW) highlighted in the gleaner specific areas where social workers can make a positive contribution by adding important social value to areas of great need. Some areas where social workers can contribute positively thus creating great improvement is the health system (Medical Social Worker) [10].

The social worker can think about ways to improve healthcare systems to reduce burdens by advocating for increased number of beds at hospitals and strengthening the discharge process so that patients are not remaining at hospitals longer than needed. The social worker can advocate for:

- Increased number of specialist doctors, more fully functioning technical equipment,
- Increases number of medications
- Increase number of medical and psychiatric social workers who practice in preventative and restorative care.
- Social worker can advocate for improved internet connectivity so that more children can be connected to online classes, with emphasis on schools in remote areas. Social workers main role is advocacy, to advocate for the people. When a social worker can advocate for the people and successfully get results the social worker would accomplish the mandate
- The social worker can advocate for the development more community open spaces with available exercise equipment, where community members can engage in physical activities to maintain healthy lifestyles. This can be a project of the Social Development Commission (SDC) and COVID-19 protocols would be observed.
- The social worker can advocate for the development of more agro parks where communities can have food security and be self-sufficient as a way of life – a special project of the Ministry of Industry Commerce Agriculture and Fisheries and Rural Agricultural Development Authority in particular.
- Social workers can carry out interventions through partnerships that Provide support for families to adequately meet the needs of their children in 24-hour cycles, considering those who have recently been reintegrated into their families following state care and parents who depend on caregivers or schools to keep their children occupied during the day.

JASW highlighted in the gleaner that: This approach would include more robust community parenting support programmes operated by directed by social workers, which could help parents improve their ability to care for their children and make home the best place for children to be – the ideal and not an anomaly. The Roving Caregivers Programme out of The University of the West Indies, Mona Social Work Department, is one model for reflection. The article also stated that the social worker can add great value to the development plans of Jamaica, the social workers, is to agitate for the changes that are needed to keep people at the centre of development. Further stated was that the pandemic has reinforced for social workers what the profession has been advocating for many decades: That is the importance of community-based practice, localized interventions, and active community mobilization.

In conclusion, despite the many challenges, Jamaica should know that social workers stand confident and ready to continue to work to mitigate the existing gaps in service delivery and improve our practice to, ultimately, benefit the nation. Social workers are indeed relevant in this post-pandemic era and continue to strive to remain relevant, effective and to retool where necessary. As long as there are human beings there will be a need, as long as there are needs there will be a demand for social workers.

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