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PROFESSION 2

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Social workers function at all levels of society to assist and empower clients in achieving overall health and social wellness. However, though the services provided by social workers are vital, and irreplaceable by other professions, social workers are not often given their due credit for their work and as such the profession suffers. As students of social work, we have a responsibility to advocate for and promote the values and betterment of the social work profession. By supporting the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative Act, or SWRI, students can create a more promising future for everyone entering the social work profession.

While several students may enter college with a desire to enter social services, low pay, difficult working conditions, and negative attitudes toward the profession deter many from a career as a social worker. Social workers may leave the profession overtime because of the high costs incurred by student loans, inadequate salaries, and limited practice opportunities. The SWRI offers creative solutions to recruit and retain students and social workers who may have left the profession, as well as outlining protocol to conduct research that promotes the value of the profession and to make steps to reimburse and compensate social workers appropriately for their work.

In order to recruit capable individuals to the social work profession, the SWRI proposes solutions that eliminate barriers and promotes education and awareness. Through the SWRI, social workers are advocating for higher pay, equal to that of fields with similar education levels. Social workers are also working towards loan forgiveness, so that social work students are not overly burdened with debt and discouraged from continuing into the social work field. Social workers are advocating for positions to be upheld for BSW and MSW individuals, and not ceded to other applicants without the necessary schooling and training. The SWRI is also working

towards educating Schools of Social Work about appropriate academic requirements and CSWE regulations. Finally, the SWRI seeks to open up opportunities for social worker to continue their training and education in clinical practice, thus increasing the numbers of social workers in the mental health field.

Social workers face a plethora of challenges by being part of the profession, both inside the profession and out. Besides carrying heavy caseloads and poor compensation, social workers are often misunderstood by society and are not confident in their profession. The SWRI seeks to retain social work as a profession by improving the working conditions as well as the attitudes and perceptions towards social workers. According to the SWRI, advocates will work closely with employers of social workers to improve pay, working conditions, and practice opportunities. Part of this work will be educating employers on the cost to benefit ratio of employing social workers, as well as encouraging social workers to advocate for themselves within their professions. Social workers often underestimate the good they do and their value. With the help of the SWRI, social workers can become aware of their important position in society and become empowered to better their working conditions and bolster their self-confidence in their value to the profession.

In order to preserve the value of the social work profession, the SWRI plans to conduct and collect research to prove social workers effectiveness to improve the wellbeing of clients, as well as the value of a trained and schooled social worker. Some employers fill BSW and MSW positions with unqualified individuals and caseworkers. Research may show the benefits of filling these positions with qualified workers both in the services they provide for clients and their ability to provide those services. SWRI research will also demonstrate the monetary benefit of employing social workers. For example, social workers can not only provide services and

resources to clients, but they also have the ability to empower clients to advocate for themselves; thereby saving money for service providers and helping clients achieve their wellbeing and independence. The SWRI also promotes research as a learning and practice tool, especially through the evidence-based practice model for social workers. In order to demonstrate social workers viability to government agencies and legislatures, social workers must take part in research that proves the efficiency and knowledge of their practices.

As stated before, many students are deterred from entering the profession because of the low pay and poor reimbursement, especially compared to similar positions and education levels.

The SWRI seeks to raise wages for social workers, and to differentiate compensation between BSW, MSW, and LCSW. Social workers who hold advanced degrees, especially LCSW who work in clinical settings, are not often reimbursed by Medicare and payers as those in comparable fields. The SWRI is working to remedy this disparity by lobbying in congress to provide appropriate funding and prove the necessity of these positions.

Social work students are entering the profession in a key position to educate and advocate on behalf of all social workers. The energy, passion, and voices of social work students can be utilized as a powerful force to improve the reputation and integrity of the profession. As students, we can take part in supporting the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative Act by educating ourselves and others about the bill, voicing our support of the bill to key congressmen, and providing testimonies of the positive effects the bill will have on many social workers. As part of the future of social work, students are a vital key to ensuring the success and growth of the social work profession.