

## NIH Investment in Social Work Research: Promise vs. Achievement

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## Background: Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?

- Over 100 SSWR sessions
- Attendance at NIH tutorials and other IASWR pre-conference workshops
- *Directory of Social Work Research Grants Awarded by the National Institutes of Health*
- Institutional efforts: mentoring; seed money; creating research infrastructure

## Background: Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty? - 2

- Social workers' research capabilities: are they acknowledged?
- Social and behavioral research are not limited to the domain of psychology
- Need to better position faculty members to submit meritorious research grant proposals

## This Presentation

- These advances are many and noteworthy.
- Nonetheless, an analysis of the promise versus the achievements of NIH investments in social work research over the past decade, including the 2003 *NIH Plan for Social Work Research* and the resulting three companion social work research program, is instructive.

## Social Work Program Announcements: Background

- Senate Appropriations Committee Report: NIH is "to develop a social work research plan that outlines research priorities, as well as a research agenda, across NIH Institutes and Centers." by April 1, 2003."
- Response: the NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Service Research convened a Social Work Research Working Group and developed the *NIH Plan for Social Work Research*

## Social Work PAs Background - 2

- The report "recognize(d) a number of steps that NIH could take to...further galvanize social work research at the NIH."
- Recommendations included: "Propose a new program announcement...to provide the impetus and resources to fully incorporate social work's unique concepts and perspectives into the NIH research portfolio and to build the scientific base to be used by allied health professionals."

## Social Work Program Announcements

- The tangible outcome of the report was the NIH release in December 2005 of *Research on Social Work Practice and Concepts in Health*.
- Three companion program announcements, via the regular research project grant R01 mechanism, the small grant R03 mechanism, and the exploratory/experimental research grant R21 mechanism.

## Social Work Program Announcements - 2

- BUT – the stated purpose of these Program Announcements is to “encourage innovative, theory-driven empirical *research on social work practice, concepts and theory* as these relate to the NIH public health goal of improving health outcomes for persons with medical and behavioral disorders and conditions” (emphasis added).
- This is a limited and constricted definition of research within the purview of social workers.
- Compare slide 6, “...fully incorporate social work’s unique concepts and perspectives into the NIH research portfolio.”

## Social Work Program Announcements - 3

- Absence of a dedicated study section or special emphasis panel
- Applications are reviewed in standing committees whose membership expertise is unrepresentative of social work.
- No social worker researchers were added as full, regular members to the standing committees that review the grant applications received in response to the PAs.

## Social Work Program Announcements - 4

- NIH efforts should not emphasize something denominated as “social work research.”
- They should not exclude social work researchers from contributing to work supported throughout NIH by researchers regardless of discipline.
- The Program Announcement approach could convey the unfortunate and misleading impression that “social work research” is akin to, but not quite equivalent to or the equal of, research conducted by members of other disciplines.

## Recommendation 1 - Social Work Program Announcements

- The National Institutes of Health should modify the three companion social work Program Announcements to broaden them beyond their current limitation, or emphasis, on “social work research” or “social work practice, concepts, and theories.”
- A separate, dedicated, standing Scientific Review Group, or at least a Special Emphasis Panel, should be established to consider applications received in response to these PAs.
- And social work should be among the disciplines represented on the membership roster.

## Center Grants

- In the past, NIMH has supported a PA for Center grants to schools of social work.
- And, in the past, NIDA has supported a PA for Center grants to schools of social work.
- The goals of these programs were to build or strengthen a stable institutional infrastructure to develop the capability of faculty members to conduct independent and interdisciplinary research and to improve the quality of service interventions.

## Center Grants - 2

- But that was then.
- For example, the last new NIDA social work center award was made in 2003.
- It is important to recall that the program was not discontinued because of a finding that it was not productive.
- Rather, the principal reason seems to be competing priorities for dollars from the mechanism of support, namely, "other research."

## Center Grants - 3

- Were the programs successful?
- Yes, as an analysis of the *IASWR Directory* can display.
- Today, more researchers at more schools of social work are well-positioned to take advantage of NIH research opportunities.

## Center Grants - 4

- Now let's return to the *Directory of Social Work Research Grants Awarded by the National Institutes of Health*.
- The directory shows 653 grants made over 15 years.
- That averages to 43 per year.

## Center Grants - 5

- However, in the last three years for which data are available, the numbers have been significantly below average, namely, 30 in 2005, 36 in 2006, and 22 in 2007.
- The numbers are even worse than they appear when one factors in that they include both continuation years of previously awarded grants as well as a second or subsequent grant to continue previously supported work.

## Recommendation 2 - Center Grants

- NIH center awards to schools of social work for infrastructure building have resulted in increased research capacity and participation in NIH awards, to the benefit of public health.
- Many researchers at the 100 or so schools of social work that have not received a single NIH research award are ready to make additional contributions.
- To achieve this benefit, NIH should reinstitute a social work research development centers program of awards to schools of social work for infrastructure building to increase their research capacity and productivity.

## Problem: "Equivalent" Degree

- Social worker researchers, in competing for NIH funding, suffer from two other distinct disadvantages relative to professionals from other disciplines.
- First, until relatively recently, successful doctoral candidates in schools of social work were awarded the doctoral degree of Doctor of Social Work (DSW), not the Ph.D. NIH announcements typically confer eligibility upon those with an M.D., Ph.D., or "equivalent" degree.

### **Problem: "Equivalent" Degree - 2**

- Many reviewers – and, it must be said, NIH staff as well – historically have been unaware about what the DSW degree is, including whether or not it is a research degree or whether or not it is a clinical degree.
- However, in recent years, many schools of social work have discontinued the awarding of the DSW in favor of the Ph.D. degree.
- That may serve to mitigate this problem of perceived eligibility for research grants and research training.

### **Problem: Career Progression and Interruption**

- The second problem, though, is more persistent.
- This relates to the fact that the MSW degree is a full professional degree that enables its recipient, upon passing the relevant professional organization certification and state licensure examinations, to be a full member of the clinical profession of social work.

### **Problem: Career Progression and Interruption - 2**

- Unlike the case for other professions and disciplines, it is not an unusual or aberrant pattern that only after several or even many years of practice in the profession do those MSW social workers who decide upon a research career begin their doctoral studies.

### **Problem: Career Progression and Interruption - 3**

- Further, for many social workers, their career, and research career, pathways include a career interruption of several years or longer, oftentimes with part-time clinical practice.
- Research careers begin late and do not follow a straight-line trajectory.

### **Problem: Career Progression and Interruption - 4**

- The problem is that the NIH early career investigator awards, especially those for individuals who need mentorship, are not a good fit for individuals who may be age 40 or older when they seek their initial grant support.
- To harness research by social workers, NIH should tailor career-transition awards to be responsive to these realities.

### **Recommendation 3 – Entry or Re-Entry into Research Careers**

- NIH should redefine "new" or "young" investigators eligible for early career awards.
- NIH should review its mechanisms of support to assist re-entry into research.
- Specifically...

### Recommendation 3: Entry or Re-Entry into Research Careers - 2

- NIH should review whether the findings from studies supported by:
  - the NIH announcement, *Research on Causal Factors and Interventions that Promote and Support the Careers of Women in Biomedical and Behavioral Science and Engineering*, and
  - the NSF announcement, *ADVANCE: Increasing the Participation and Advancement of Women in Academic Careers and Engineering Careers* are relevant to social worker researchers.

### Recommendation 4: Research Supplements

- NIH, as it has done for designated priority research areas and researchers, should initiate a grants supplement program through which it solicits applications from funded principal investigators to add a social worker researcher.
- The *Research Supplements to Promote Re-Entry into Biomedical and Behavioral Research Careers* grant announcement should be reviewed for applicability to social work researchers.

### Recommendation 5: Small Grants

- NIH should expand its commitment to awarding small awards (R03) for new and junior faculty.
- NIAAA's and NIDA's just-announced *Support Opportunity for Addiction Research (SOAR) for New Investigators (R03 mechanism)* bears review for its potential.
- Review criteria should decrease reliance on investigator track record in lieu of research potential and promise of the individual to conduct high-quality research independently.

### Recommendation 6: FIRST Award

- The First Independent Research Support and Transition (FIRST) Awards (R29) should be reinstated for social work applicants with no previous NIH support.
- This program was discontinued in 1998; the NIH policy now is no longer to accept FIRST award applications.
- However, the rationale for the decision, that it no longer was needed as first-time applicants fared nearly as well as established investigators, is not true anymore, when the average age of an NIH grantee is over 50 and the average age of a first-time awardee is over 40.

### Recommendation 6: FIRST Award - 2

- The guidelines when the program was operational specified, "The purpose of the FIRST award is to provide a sufficient period of research support for newly independent, biomedical and behavioral science investigators to initiate their own research and demonstrate the merit of their own research ideas...."
- The program seems particularly well-matched to the needs of social work researchers and to the NIH intention to expand the perspectives brought to bear in its programs of research support.

### Recommendation 7: Mentoring

- For those researchers not yet ready for independent research, NIH should create additional opportunities for mentoring graduate students and early career faculty from schools of social work to enhance their motivation and commitment to research careers.
- PAR-07-386, *Mentoring Programs to Diversify the Mental Health and Substance Abuse HIV/AIDS Research Workforce Through Innovative Educational Initiatives*, possibly might serve as a model for adaptation.

## The Elephant in the Room

- We're in a time of budget stringency.
- We're told to expect cutbacks.
- Rather, in times such as these, good stewardship of federal funds demands more discipline, to seize on areas ripe for support to further improve the health of the public.

## The Elephant in the Room - 2

- To improve the health of the public means to mine the clinical insights, wisdom, and judgments of clinicians, to guide research questions and research.
- Now social workers provide more counseling than any other profession in this country, and have that wisdom.
- But it is woefully insufficiently marshaled by the NIH for the betterment of society.

## The Elephant in the Room - 3

- I submit that even, or especially, at a time when dollars are tight, and success rates are declining, the attainment of the NIH Institutes' goal of improving the nation's health and well-being necessitates outreach to less-seasoned researchers who now face yet an additional barrier to becoming funded vis-à-vis those who already have successfully navigated the system.
- Among other benefits, such outreach will permit becoming informed by new perspectives.

## The Recommendations

- The recommendations suggest a number of changes that can make a difference.
- Implementation of each is independent of implementation of the others.
- Taken together, though, if implemented, they truly would demonstrate commitment by the NIH to enhanced participation in its research opportunities by social work researchers for the benefit of the public.