

Greater Boston Legal Services Welfare Law Unit Social Work Program

1. Origins: Recognition and definition of need

The nature of welfare case-handling changed radically with welfare reform. We had to begin delving into details of families' lives to a much greater extent in order to identify legal protections that might be available to the family. Through that process, we uncovered pressing needs, such as mental health or domestic violence-related, which often became key aspects of our advocacy with DTA for the relief our clients need. As we expressed openness to hearing about needs that might impact on the clients' welfare cases, clients opened up about a multitude of other deep needs, most of which were unmet and many of which were not legal.

This led to our exploration of ways to take advantage of the different skill and knowledge base offered by social work in trying to meet these needs. In 1998 through 1999, we began looking into the possibility of a social work field program that would involve placement of social work graduate student interns in the Welfare Law Unit (WLU). As part of that effort, we needed to articulate the types of need we hoped would be addressed by such a program. We identified the following general types of non-legal work a social work intern might do:

- A. Work needed directly for our representation of the client in her welfare case, such as in-depth interviewing about disability, researching and connecting the client with appropriate providers, researching and connecting the client with education and training providers.
- B. Work that would be supportive to the welfare case, but primarily provided to meet the client's needs, such as assessment of need and referral to a mental health provider for on-going counseling. This would involve the social work intern working with client to identify goals, to select a provider, and to change health insurance options, if necessary, in order, to secure the desired provider.
- C. Work on a matter or issue that is not related to the welfare case but of critical importance to the client. (Sometimes these matters are the client's top priority, over the welfare case. Examples of work done by the social work interns once the project became a reality include warding off utility terminations, dealing with utility arrearages, finding a provider to remove the client's of orthodonture- which was long overdue- without charge, providing information about Asperger's syndrom resources for parents.)

2. Conception of program which would meet clients' and GBLS staff needs, along with social work education goals

To begin to think about designing a social work field placement, we recognized that we needed a clear understanding of what requirements a field placement must meet. Because social work differentiates between clinical work and policy (macro) work and because the curriculum is

closely calibrated to meet licensing requirements, we knew we had to factor in the specific needs of *social work* interns, which we were not accustomed to consider with *law student* interns. This process was much easier than it might have been, due to the fact that two WLU advocates, Lisa Siegal and Sarah Levy, have MSWs (Master of Social Work) in clinical social work.

We contacted several social work schools (including BU, BC, and Salem State) that we thought would be open to the idea and got copies of their field placement curricula. In reviewing these curricula and in conversations, we found BU to be the most open. BU's willingness to work with us was due in large part to their respect for GBLS as an organization and their prior experience with a social work field placement with the former Income Maintenance Unit. Learning some of the hurdles faced in the previous project — primarily around confidentiality issues (see below) — helped us in our design of this model.

We then met with one of the deans of the BU School of Social Work and with field placement staff to explain the work of the GBLS WLU and to brainstorm the vision we saw for a social work field placement and what models might work. These conversations were eased by Lisa and Sarah having MSW's and being able to articulate the common values and work of social work and GBLS even though, as a legal agency, GBLS is an unusual and challenging field placement.

3. Exploration of ethical issues, especially regarding mandatory reporting

The single biggest hurdle to overcome in conceiving the program, in measuring its value to clients, and in implementing it has been the perceived and real differences regarding confidentiality: that social workers are mandatory reporters to Department of Social Services (DSS) of child abuse and neglect by caretakers. This exception to the general confidentiality which social workers also maintain contrasts sharply with the near sanctity of legal confidentiality. We reviewed the mandatory reporting statutes and social work licensing requirements internally and retained outside legal counsel (an attorney with experience working closely with the National Association of Social Workers) to advise us. We ended up concluding that we could not avoid having social work students be subject to mandatory reporting. Therefore, we took other measures to minimize adverse impact as much as possible. Specifically:

- A. We developed a social work retainer which details (a) the specific matters with which the social work intern will be helping the client, (b) which parts of the intern's work is needed for the client's legal case, (c) the client's choice to proceed with or stop services at any time, (d) the independent of status of the legal case, and (e) the different confidentiality rules for social work interns.
- B. We trained the WLU staff to discuss this distinction in confidentiality rules with clients before the client agreed to social work services.
- C. We train each new social work intern on how to discuss the social work retainer and services with clients.

- D. We developed a detailed protocol to maximize communication and minimize risk if a student does have concern about possible abuse or neglect of a child in a family they are working with. We have had to implement this protocol two to three times over the past three years, and it worked well after the first time.

4. Identify and interview of supervisor

We realized early on that Lisa and Sarah could not take on the role of social work supervisor. We had to work very hard to find a social work supervisor (LICSW) who knew our client population, had a clinical expertise which we could turn to, was sensitive to students needs, was open to the differences inherent in GBLS as a field placement, and who would be able to work with us openly on issues of mandatory reporting. Finding this match in Jane Honoroff has been vital to the success and growth of the program and the benefits to GBLS.

5. Identify and interview of students each semester

Each semester Sarah reviews resumes from potential social work interns identified by BU and passes on likely candidates to Lisa and Melanie. Lisa and Sarah interview students in person to determine whether they will be a good fit for the agency. Students who are selected are also referred to the social work supervisor to talk to in advance of beginning the placement.

6. Training of students

At the beginning of each placement, Sarah and Lisa design a training program and schedule for the interns which introduces them to the work and client population of GBLS and the WLU, and the general legal backdrop of welfare law (including child care and education and training issues). The training introduces the interns to all of the WLU advocates and their specialties, and introduces them to mental health issues and family circumstances, and their significance to welfare law (e.g. depression, anxiety disorders, domestic violence, learning disabilities, sexual assault).

7. Selection of cases

Sarah lets the WLU know when students are available to take cases, and screens each possible cases with the respective advocate to determine whether the case is appropriate for a social work intern and to make sure that the client understands and has agreed to the different confidentiality rules the social work intern is under. Sarah also screens the cases for possible concerns of child abuse and neglect in order to minimize the risk of a GBLS social work intern needing to file a 51A. If there is a significant risk, the case is not referred to the social work intern.

8. Supervision of cases, students

Social work interns are supervised on individual cases by the advocate who referred the case (and is handling or was handling a welfare case for the client), along with Sarah (and Lisa as back-up) for general oversight. The LICSW supervisor supervises the students on social work professional development issues that arise in the course of the casework.

9. Working with the LICSW supervisor

Sarah communicates supervision issues that come up to the social work (LICSW) supervisor and BU. She also serves as the liaison between the social work supervisor and GBLS advocates, including coordinating anonymous case consults (i.e., about clients who do not have a social work case with a social work intern) for WLU advocates and for other units' advocates as requested.

10. Administrative

Sarah handles referral and screening, and database management of social work cases, ensuring that each student has a sufficient number and range of types of cases, in addition to making sure that students get exposure to as many other appropriate opportunities while they are at GBLS (e.g., visiting DTA offices, attending hearings, seeing legislative campaigns in action, going to CLE's). Sarah also handles administrative requirements with BU, coordinating and, with Lisa, attending site visits and intern evaluations by BU faculty each semester. The social work supervisor primarily completes intern evaluations each semester, with input from Sarah and Lisa.