

# Concerned Social Workers

When Concerned Social Workers (CSW) first constituted itself, we saw one of our immediate tasks as organising social workers in the greater Johannesburg area. While a number of social workers were sympathetic to attempts to challenge social work practice in South Africa and to begin to define alternatives, few of these people were prepared to actually form an organisation and this became a site of struggle itself. As a result, the organisation focussed on problems and experiences of social workers working in an unjust society. We found that many people had similar problems and had to face particular frustrations. We attempted to show people the importance of forming an organisation and the necessity of collective action and resolution of difficulties, rather than experiences remaining as isolated concerns and grievances.

## Organising social workers

The task of organising social workers is to a large extent undermined by the particular ethic of professionalism that exists for most health workers in South Africa today. As with other professionals in South Africa, the codes of conduct and working are largely defined by the apartheid system itself. Not only do many social workers actually work for the state but most social workers are taught to accept values and ethics which are in fact removed from the reality of social work practice in South Africa today. Social workers, as with other health workers, tend to become overwhelmed by the enormity of problems faced by their clients and so develop a way of coping which fails to challenge in any way the causes of these problems.

## Providing alternatives

While the task remains central to our everyday functioning, we have managed over the past few years to strengthen our organisation and incorporate more social workers into the group. We have been able to do this by educating social workers and by providing alternatives to the views expressed by the state around the role of social workers in our

society. By working with other progressive organisations we have also been able to put people in touch with alternative forms of organisation and to stimulate debate and discussion around the possibilities that exist for a post apartheid society. At the same time social workers have been able to participate in services and campaigns which are directly challenging the effects of repression and deprivation evident in our society.

## **Practising social work under repression**

Because social workers work primarily with people in need, in the present South African context this often involves people who have been directly or indirectly affected by state repression. CSW has seen one of its roles as providing a service, together with other organisations, to people affected by detention, disappearances and other forms of state violence. While repression remains prevalent, CSW will continue to see itself playing an important role in this regard.

Participation within initiatives dealing with the effects of repression, has also had the important effect of raising awareness about social work practice and how skills can be used effectively.

While this activity has been undertaken by a number of members, we feel that we still need to involve more social workers in contributing to these services.

## **Social work in a post apartheid society**

CSW will continue to see its role as contributing to a critical understanding of social work practice at present and to the development of an appropriate social work practice in a post apartheid society. We have attempted to do this in two ways. Firstly, by focussing on these topics in our official publication *In Touch*, and secondly by attempting to generate and encourage research into these areas. One of our most positive campaigns has been activity and education around the new welfare policy proposed by the government. CSW, together with other social work associations concerned with the governments initiatives, has attempted to educate ourselves about the proposals and to pressurise the government into reconsidering its plans. We have been able to generate significant opposition to the government and to provide alternatives and have also been able to contribute to a national initiative to oppose the new welfare policy.

We remain committed to educating the social worker population as a whole. This means trying to continually reach social workers who are not politically active but who, through their experiences in practice have an innate abhorrence to the devastation to people's lives as a result of the apartheid system in South Africa.

## **Membership, structure, campaigns and activities**

Membership of CSW is open to all social workers and associated workers. The structure of CSW is based on a three tier system, which was established to facilitate the effective function and co-ordination of CSW's work and activities. The structure comprises of an executive, a council and a general forum. Members come together at general forum meetings which are held once a month. This provides both an educational and supportative forum. Members of CSW are also involved in different subgroups which operate independently of each other. The subgroups include:

### **The detainee service subgroup**

The activities of this subgroup include:

- involvement in support work at tea parties for, and visits to, families of detainees;
- counselling of ex-detainees;
- training and follow up services of social workers in the area of detention;
- active participation in campaigns around the release of all detainees.

### **The media subgroup**

The media subgroup is responsible for producing any publication put out by CSW. A writers workshop has in the past been held for members of the media subgroup focussing on developing writing and editing skills. CSW publications include:

*In Touch* - a quarterly newsletter addressing relevant issues and concerns related to the social work profession as a whole;

*Towards People's Welfare* - by Leila Patel;

*Special AGM Publication* - August 1988;

*Annual Report of CSW* - September 1987 - September 1988;

*Creche Facilities at Conferences* - a handbook.

(These publications are available on request from the contact address given at the end of this article.)

### **Education subgroup**

This group organises workshops, seminars and lectures around areas which promote the thinking and awareness of social workers in South Africa as well as addressing areas of difficulty in the social work profession. Areas that have been addressed include:

- social workers' working conditions;
- constraints and challenges in social work practice;



**Violence in Joza township - social workers cannot practice in isolation from a society affected by apartheid.**

- social advocacy;
- *the legal rights of our clients;*
- privatisation of social work services.

## Welfare policy subgroup

This group functions as a response and action group around areas relating to welfare policies in South Africa. A conference was organised together with the South African Black Social Workers Association (SABSWA), Johannesburg Indian Social Welfare Association (JISWA), Society for Social Workers, and CSW in order to encourage debate around the implications of the new welfare policy. The new welfare policy was passed approximately a year ago by parliament, basing the South African system on two fundamental principles: privatisation of social welfare and the principle of racial differentiation. A further conference is to be held shortly in order to continue this debate.

## Children under repression subgroup

This subgroup continues to campaign around the issue of children who are victims of repression. This was initiated by a conference in 1985. A year later, an alliance of concerned organisations was established calling for the release of all children in prison.

This subgroup has broadened its activities by becoming involved in the training of creche workers and community workers. The subgroup has also held a panel discussion on child abuse within the South African context and continues to organise around issues which are pertinent to the repression and daily living of all children in South Africa.

## Research subgroup

CSW is in the process of developing a research group. While individual members are involved in research which is addressing a critical approach to social work in South Africa, this has been identified by CSW as an area which needs to be developed further. Further subgroups and activities may be developed by CSW if a need arises which falls within the aims and objectives of the organisation.

## Working statement of the CSW

### Our vision for South Africa

In accordance with our values we, as social workers, are concerned with the quality of life of all the people in our country. We stand for a united, non-racial and democratic South Africa where all people will receive economic, social, health and educational security. We strive to unite all social workers to work towards the removal of all forms of oppression and exploitation.

### Our vision for the welfare system

As social workers we commit ourselves to a unified and equal welfare system, where services will be available to all who need them.

### Our method

*Proactive:* We strive to work alongside individuals, groups and communities in developing together the necessary skills and resources to respond to the challenges and demands placed on everyone by the apartheid society in which we live.

*Reactive:* We endeavour to respond appropriately to the needs of our clients and to be sensitive to new needs emerging. In facing this challenge we seek to address such issues as people's experience of all forms of violence, poverty, unemployment and the

disruption of family life. We commit ourselves particularly to the attainment of the rights of children. We oppose any legislative measures which may be of disadvantage to our clients and colleagues.

## **Education, organisation and support of social workers**

As social workers we need to develop an understanding of the changing sociological, economic and political factors which impinge on the people we serve. We commit ourselves to supporting social workers, especially social workers who themselves are victims of the broader structures, to challenge the constraints which restrict and limit them.

We see social work students as being actively involved in the activities of CSW and in our quest to attain these objectives.

We will also link, collaborate and unite with social work associations, welfare organisations and progressive social service groupings where appropriate.

In developing our knowledge and skills we seek to stimulate debate around alternatives to the present welfare system, so that we may respond effectively to our clients' needs.

## **Accountability**

We are accountable to our clients who are predominantly those who experience the oppression and exploitation in South Africa. We strive for the inclusion of our clientele in the organisation and delivery of social services. Thus, we commit ourselves to actively building links with the sectors of the progressive movement which encounter welfare concerns, e.g. women's groups, health services, educational and trade union initiatives.

We believe that CSW is a dynamic organisation sensitive to the needs of our clients. Therefore this document cannot be seen as a permanent statement of our vision and method, but will evolve in response to the demands made on us as social workers by the progressive movement and social workers themselves.

## **Contact address**

Concerned Social Workers  
P.O. Box 301  
Wits  
2050