City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Fall 12-17-2021

School Social Workers in Texas

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Introduction

The community I chose to serve is school social workers, mostly in Texas. I chose this community because I worked as a school social worker for a year at a high school in Austin, Texas, and my time in social work taught me that not many people know what social workers do —I was determined to change that.

I specifically chose school social workers because I believe they have the opportunity to impact so many types of people. From students at the school, their families, school staff, and the community as a whole, schools and the education system is one of the largest places in our country where people of various walks of life congregate.

Social work services in schools began in the early 1900s to foster communication between school and home, and continues to act as a home-school-community liaison. According to the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), social workers are trained mental health professionals who can assist with mental health concerns, behavioral concerns, positive behavioral support, academic and classroom support, consultation with teachers, parents and administrators, as well as provide individual and group counseling/therapy.

Background and Context

What do school social workers do?

Most social workers I talked to had a common complaint of working in a system that did not coincide or really recognize what exactly their job role was or all that they do. What I heard from school social workers, and from my experience as well, the opportunity of people knowing what they do could be tremendous in ways that expand the resources they have to offer students and communities.

However, according to data collected by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for the 2019-2020 school year, only 172 out of the 1,002 school districts in Texas had social workers as employees, and out of the 125 schools in the Austin Independent School District (AISD), there are only 8 social workers in the district.

Stephanie Ochocki, a school social worker in the Twin Cities, expressed to me how tiring and lonely her profession feels sometimes because people don't understand what she does. She believes if more people understood what social work was, she'd feel more seen, connected, and supported by those she works with.

"You are often alone in what you are fighting for or having to convince others to join you in fighting for your clients and what the social work profession can provide for the school, students, parents, and greater community," Ochocki said.

Mental Health Providers

In an interview with Sarah Shaney, a social worker and licensed mental health professional in the AISD, I was told in the fall of 2020 the district had terminated its contract with their outsourced mental health provider, VIDA Clinic, resulting in a 50% reduction of mental health providers on campus.

Blanca McGee, a social worker in Dallas ISD, explained to me the importance of having mental health providers on campus and how not everyone in the school knows social workers are licensed to help.

"It's very hard for students to cope with grief and loss but I don't think the district or students know that social workers are key to helping students work through that. Most of the time we're only aware a student is going through that if a teacher notices and notifies us, or if the student or family comes to us directly," McGee said.

The Disconnect

Laura Hulin, a social worker in Houston ISD, said it has been impossible to get her district to hear her out on what the best implementations of social services would be. Her district created a title called Wraparound Specialist that matches struggling students with one of the various social services agencies on campus.

"This creates a complete loss of the social work model that assesses the student by sitting and talking with them, figuring out what they need and what the root causes or what's impacting them may be. It speaks to the fact that no one in the district knows what social workers do," Hulin shared. "Instead, they're limiting our roles by putting money into these new jobs instead of realizing what they need is what we've been asking them to put in the Texas Education Code."

Projects and Links

Through the numerous interviews I conducted with school social workers across Texas I learned the various challenges and needs they faced and began to brainstorm what I could do or create to help address those needs.

The number one thing I heard over and over again was the complaint and eagerness for people to know what school social workers do. I wrote an explainer piece on why it's a problem nobody in Texas seems to know what school social workers do followed by an opinion piece on why all schools should have a social worker.

I then partnered with the Texas chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) who asked me to create one-pagers on the various ways in which school social workers help students and how they're valuable to schools. NASW distributed the one-pagers to legislators during the Texas legislative session in an effort to pass a bill that implements social services in the Texas Education Code. The bill wouldn't require Texas schools to have social workers, but

would require every school to have at least some way for social services to be provided to any student who may need it.

Pivoting

Another common thing I heard from the community was that there is never enough time in the day to get all of their work done. Sarah Shaney had said, "There's a dissonance between what we know we can do but what we're required to do [documentation], and so we end up being pulled in a million directions."

I wanted to create a product that would alleviate the workload that school social workers are faced with. My initial thought was to create a website that holds all the forms, links and information on the various resources they distribute to clients so it's all there in one place and they don't have to go searching their files for where each form or resource sheet lives. However, once I began asking my community members if this would be useful, I was told it was already in the works of being created.

Instead of competing with the website already in the works, I decided to pivot my product idea and began making a [chatbot](). I sent out a survey for feedback and further ideas of what the chatbot could contain to help alleviate daily workload and the responses I received were to include information and links to forms and assessments that school staff could complete on their own instead of bringing it to the social worker to do. The chatbot serves as a resource that can be shared with any school staff so that they can fill out CPS or runaway reports and complete suicidal ideation risk assessments on their own without the social workers help.

Going Forward

Majority of my connections to community members were through my personal network of social workers in and near the Austin area and those I was introduced to through my partnership with the Texas NASW.

Since a lot of my community is not active online, my access and connection was strictly narrowed to individual conversations and the ways NASW could help. I realized a pattern of the same people responding or reaching out when NASW sent things on my behalf. I would have liked to speak with a broader range of community members as I know I missed out on hearing more opinions and struggles within the community.

I was at a loss trying to connect with school social workers during Covid when most of them were not easily accessible online. Reflecting back, I could have tried to attend more virtual conferences and meetings but most did have costs to attend which I could not afford. My best bet was finding people through partnerships and I wish I could have partnered with more social work organizations such as the SSWAA.

Metrics
I do not have quantitative data on the chatbot or other projects I've created at this point, but I do have a lot of testimonials from my community members and those I partnered with that I've used

to measure the impact I've had on my community. I didn't set out with a specific number of people to speak with, but the handful who I did were very influential within the community. Many of my connections through NASW were community members who not only were involved in various advocacy efforts for the community, such as writing legislation, but also knew each other well because they valued being connected to those who were also working towards and fighting for what they were.

I worked closely with both the executive director of the Texas NASW, Will Francis, and the government relations director of the Texas NASW, Alison Mohr Boleware, throughout my time in this program. I was told by Boleware that the one-pagers I made were incredibly helpful since it strengthened the reasoning behind why having social services in schools is important and how passing this piece of legislation could be helpful. Francis continued my work with NASW as he found it "very helpful and innovative to the advancement of school social work" and as graduation approached, he began connecting me with colleagues who were looking to hire and offered to serve as a reference for any jobs I applied to.

When I spoke with community members about my desire to write about school social workers and use it as a tool to make the public more aware of the profession, I was pleasantly surprised to hear they thought it was not only useful but necessary and needed. Each time I spoke with Stephanie Ochocki, a board member of the SSWAA, she reiterated her excitement that I was working on this, because not many school social workers have the time to do it themselves, but also how important it is to have these things in writing.

"Social work historically has been bad about documenting what the profession has done which I believe is why there's such a disconnect between what we do and what the public believes we do. Social work has been around since the early 1900s and yet we don't have much documentation about it, so I think your writing about social work is not only exciting but needed and will go on to serve the profession in the future," Ochocki said.

Conversations such as mine with Ochocki played out again and again as I spoke with new members of the community, but speaking with Blanca McGee, the department lead of social workers in the Grand Prairie school district, really stuck with me. McGee and her colleagues have been writing and creating videos along the lines of what I was set out to do - they produce informative Tiktoks on what the school social worker does and is there for, how students can get the help they need, etc. and write monthly newsletters that detail what the social work office is doing that month. When I told McGee what I've done and plan to do, I was expecting her to say "Great, we've done that already and it's useful," but instead I was met with a different answer.

"I think your plans sound great. Although we've been doing some of this work on our own, we can't do it all, and also, our work and information is being distributed on a small scale. I believe what you're doing can reflect what we've done but on a much larger scale, maybe even nationally. Although starting small is good, the work you're doing has the power to change larger systems and I believe it can end up in the hands of many people," McGee said.

I found it extremely encouraging to not only hear that my ideas and work were needed and important, but that the community I was working with saw large potential and believed so deeply in what I was doing.

Reflection
I learned a lot throughout this process of what engagement with a specific community looks like. For one, I learned it's harder than you may think, especially when completely confined to online.

I quickly learned that most of my community does not use social media which meant I couldn't use that platform as a way to connect with them. In non-Covid times, I may have attended events or workshops in order to meet school social workers face-to-face, but that wasn't an option at the time. Instead, I was able to pivot my approach and began speaking to people one-on-one and through word of mouth or connections through partnerships I had formed.

Beyond learning how to pivot my approach into a community, I learned how to do so during difficult times. Covid was tough on everyone in their own ways, but for my community it was especially tough in their professional lives as well. I learned how to be persistent in reaching out and flexible with having to reschedule and adhere to their schedules instead of my own—it's important to meet people where they are. I also learned how to be sensitive and extend compassion in a professional setting, which I found was best done through listening.

Most of my interviews were around an hour long, and although that was time consuming, especially when editing and transcribing, I found it vital to truly understanding who my community members were and what they cared about and needed. Also through listening, I was able to challenge myself from projecting my own ideas or beliefs of who and what I thought this community needed and sometimes came out pleasantly surprised with knowledge that I never would have known if I didn't allow myself to listen.

Lastly, a huge takeaway, especially for my community, was the importance of partnerships and acknowledging the people who are already doing the work. I would not have spoken with or been connected with half of the school social workers I talked to if it wasn't for my partnership with NASW. Partnerships and their use may not be applicable across different communities but for mine it was invaluable.

As I mentioned, I believe it's important to know who is doing the work you're setting out to do in your community, and instead of competing with them, see how you can work with them or change your ideas so it coincides with what they're already doing and/or serves your community in a different way. We don't need to reinvent the wheel and we especially don't need to be entering communities and trying to overrun the work that's already being done.

Appendix
- [Covid-19 Death Notification Process](#)
    - I wrote a story on what the policies for notifying loved ones is when someone dies from Covid-19 in a facility. I found multiple GoFundMe pages raising funds

for unexpected funerals and decided to look into why the family wasn't notified. I was able to interview funeral home directors, nurses and hospital staff, and research federal requirements on reporting Covid-19 information. I enjoyed writing this piece because it allowed me to research on my own and search for data and policies, while also connecting and speaking with people who had experienced this surprising information on many different levels.

- Video Profile of a Hobby
  - For my multimedia class we were tasked with creating a video that profiled someone either doing their job or doing a hobby they enjoy. Due to Covid, my options were limited and I could only video someone in my household. I joined my dad playing golf for a day and documented what that looks like for him and interviewed him on why he enjoys spending time doing it. I'm proud that I was able to not only capture his hobby but also who he is as a person and why he has a love for golf.
- Mass Shootings Throughout the Decades
  - I cleaned data I received from The Violence Project on the number and details of the mass shootings that occured in the United States from 2000-2010 and 2010-2020. I then created a map for readers to visualize where and to what scale each shooting occurred. I also used the data to report on the demographics of who the shooters were for those two decades and what the overall demographics for mass shooters have been.
- Ethical Guidelines for Working With School Social Workers
  - Throughout my law and ethics class we discussed what ethics we should have and uphold when working specifically with our communities. I have to be cautious with my community because they work with minors but also because the social work code of ethics does not always align with school policies or other ethical codes. Also, many of my community members had complaints about the places they work so I need to be cautious about what I decide to publish so I don't put them in a position to face unpleasant consequences.
- Chatbot
  - I created a chatbot that provides information and links on how to file CPS reports, runaway reports, and suicidal ideation risk assessments. I wanted to create something that would alleviate the workload for school social workers and after surveying my community about what would be best, I was told a way to share information on those reports and assessments would be most useful. The idea came from my community who were experiencing school staff approaching them for this information instead of them doing it on their own, so creating a guide could allow them to cut out the time they took doing so with the social worker.
- Lean Canvas
  - For my entrepreneurial journalism course we learned what a Lean Canvas was and made one for the product we created for our communities. A Lean Canvas is a template and way of going about mapping ideas and information we know about our community and how the product we want to design could help. It helped me hyper analyze the problems I heard from my community members, the

ways in which I would create and distribute my product, and the business side of how to sustain my efforts. I had never written out a business model before but what I like about the Lean Canvas is it takes into consideration who you're serving and how that factors into your ideas.

- I didn't use social media to connect with my community because I found they were not on socials. When exploring why that is so, many told me that the profession is already so taxing and emotionally draining that once the work day is done, they don't want to spend any more of their free time talking about it online. When I had tried to engage on a small reddit page for school social workers, the gatekeepers of it were very persistent that since I was a student, I was using the community to complete school assignments rather than allowing me to be a part of it and connect. Instead, I mostly engaged with my community through one-on-one interviews and emails.