

from the field of gerontological social work practice

STAFF EMPOWERMENT: RHETORIC OR REALITY?

Summer is a time of reflection on the previous year and planning for the busy calendar ahead. At SBW we review the themes of previous issues of **Notes** and consider their implications for future projects. Our March 2008 issue, *The Strengths Perspective in a Problem-Centered World*, is particularly relevant to a project - aimed at increasing and enriching the pool of social workers committed to working with older adults and their families - that we will be launching this fall.

Improving the pay and status of social workers in aging and providing them with the knowledge and skills they need to do their jobs effectively and compassionately is an essential - but not the only - task. Recruitment and retention of staff in agencies serving the aged requires an empowerment model that is a direct parallel to the strengths perspective advocated for clients.

As older adults are more than the sum of their needs for care, the workers who serve them are more than their job descriptions. Staff - as well as clients - must be helped to access often unrecognized abilities and encouraged to apply them to current challenges. Barbara Levy Simon's fine book, *The Empowerment Tradition in American Social Work: A Social Work Perspective*, provides a framework for this approach. It notes that steering a wise course between the extremes of paternalism (thinking we know what is best for others) and liberation (thinking that others will do just fine if we simply get out of their way) has never been easy for our profession.

What has worked are collaborative efforts that identify and build upon the inherent strengths of those we employ as well as those we serve. This means that fostering professional growth of workers requires the same individualized assessment and alliance-building as fostering improvement in the lives of clients. At a time of increased caseloads and decreased funding, an empowerment philosophy may well sound like empty rhetoric - fine ideals but impossible to realize. At SBW, we believe they can be a reality at this time (2008/2009) and in this place (New York City) in the course of gerontological social work. We look forward to sharing our exciting new initiative with you in a forthcoming issue of **SBW Notes**.

To meet our new Associate, please continue on the following page.

MEET OUR NEW ASSOCIATE



Daniel B. Kaplan, LICSW, LMSW, CSW-G, QDCS is a gerontological social worker with extensive expertise in Alzheimer's disease and dementia, as well as clinical practice in geriatric mental health. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. from Columbia University School of Social Work while working closely with the Hartford Geriatric Social Work Faculty Scholars Program and the Geriatric Mental Health Alliance of New York. Daniel is the former Director of Social Services for the Alzheimer's Foundation of America, where he oversaw a vibrant array of social service programs, implemented a nationwide counseling helpline for caregivers of individuals with dementia, and helped to establish a premier professional training and membership association, Dementia Care Professionals of America. Prior to this, he worked as an elder protective services investigator and provided memory disorder assessments for an area agency on aging in Massachusetts. He has led numerous training sessions and presentations on dementia care strategies for professionals and paraprofessionals, and plans to conduct research on clinical interventions and training programs for patients, family members and professionals who confront dementia. Daniel is a recent recipient of the Hartford Geriatric Social Work Doctoral Fellows Pre-Dissertation Award. He received his MSW from Simmons College Graduate School of Social Work and his bachelor's degree from SUNY Binghamton.

We look forward to your comments and experiences.

SBW Partners is a fee-for-service firm devoted to advancing social work practice in aging. Services are provided by Dr. Barbara Silverstone and Dr. Ann Burack-Weiss, the firm's founding partners, and a group of associates. For more information, please visit www.sbwpartners.com or call 212.337.2555.