
Registration: Ten years on within a non-government organisation

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Abstract

The Social Workers Registration Act 2003 has now been part of legislation for 10 years. This remains a voluntary registration and has been embraced by some organisations but not others. Whether social workers wish to become registered has been left to them and their employers to decide, as mandatory registration has not yet been legislated. This article considers the implementation of registration on Family Works Southland, the Child and Family Support Service of Presbyterian Support Southland, a non-government organisation. As a team leader within the agency, I have included my observations along with discussions held with staff and input from the manager and director.

Introduction

The 2012 Review of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 found that the government agencies embraced registration more than the non-government organisations (NGOs). Workers from the NGOs found the costs of registration off-putting. The debate continues as to whether registration for all social workers will be made mandatory. Some organisations have expressed a desire for workers to work towards registration but cannot enforce it. For some who are recruiting, they have chosen to include in the employment contract a clause that the worker will achieve registration by a given date. This then becomes a condition of employment.

Presbyterian Support Southland supports its workers with a professional development plan that identifies objectives of achieving qualification, competency and eventually registration. Financial support is given to achieve these objectives.

In order to consider social work registration within an NGO we must first consider the history and philosophy of the organisation and the journey of the social work profession. This then provides a baseline from which to consider the implementation of voluntary registration and the implications of it being made mandatory.

Presbyterian Support Southland background

In Aotearoa New Zealand, NGOs had religious and/or philanthropic beginnings. Presbyterian Support Southland was no exception. Initially part of Presbyterian Support Otago, in 1919 it became an association in its own right with two established children's homes in Southland, '...the church organised to meet perceived social needs in the community'

(Muller 1994: 3). Services for older people were established in the early 1950s with aged care homes being provided. A part-time social worker was appointed in 1964 and then a fulltime worker in 1967. After the implementation of the Children Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989, a full Child and Family Support Service was established in 1991. Family Works was the name adopted by this service in November 2005.

The requirements for a social worker back in 1967 were, '... wisdom, experience, sympathy and common sense' (Muller 1994: 89). In the early days of the Child and Family Support Service those social workers recruited were fully qualified and were already members of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW). Membership of the professional association soon became a requirement for future workers who were employed into the service. If not already a member, support was offered to gain competency and become a member.

Development of social work

The role of a social worker has been stated to, '... have a philosophical history and value base founded on egalitarian and humanitarian ideals' (Dearsley 2000: 8). Back in 1967 Ritchie stated that, '... while Christianity remains one basis for the motivation which leads people to enter social work, it is not now the only basis' (Ritchie 2008: 28). These beliefs fitted easily into many of the NGOs and their philosophies over the years.

The progress of social work and the establishment of the professional association has been well documented (Barretta-Herman 1993(a), 1993(b); Nash 1998).

The forming of the ANZASW in 1964 assisted with the forming of the social worker identity (McCreary 1994: 5). An edition of the practice journal of the Association reviewed the articles that have been printed and in particular included the progression of social work over the years (*Social Work Review*, June 2008). Today we see the current discussion on inclusion of other social service workers into the professional body (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (Inc) 2010).

The role of the social worker has been defined by the International Federation of Social Workers as:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (International Federation of Social Workers 2012: 1).

This definition has been adopted by the Social Workers Registration Board. Specific tasks have not been identified as they vary between various agencies, private and public, that employ social workers.

NGO support for professional development

The drive for mandatory registration could be seen as part of the:

... increased focus on regulation and structure from the government that is creating greater compliance demands and need for professional expertise. Included in this is the requirement of evidence-based and outcome-related approaches on planning and reporting systems (Hinde, Reid & Rice 2013).

NGOs find themselves in a competitive environment, vying for contracts. Those with the stronger qualified and registered workforce will find themselves placed within a more advantageous contracting position.

The expectations of employers that the social workers they employ will be qualified, part of the professional body and registered, has implications for both parties. This is from both financial and workload management aspects. In order to ensure current staff meet these requirements a plan is established to support them to achieve these goals. A decision is then made as to how much financial support, including time off work for study, can be offered by the NGO.

At present, NGOs have some discretion to employ workers from various professions, such as teachers and nurses, for their particular role within their agency. These workers are employed on the basis of their life experience, their local knowledge and the skills they bring to their position. For some, retraining is not an option due to the stage of their working life, other personal and family commitments, and for some the distance to travel for tertiary education. An ability to evidence social work competency can be achieved by their new knowledge and social work experience within the agency once they have completed the required hours, but for them to retrain and gain a social work qualification is often not practicable. Therefore, they may not be able to retain the registration requirements of their previous profession, due to no longer working those particular hours, or achieve this status in their new profession.

To assist with attaining a social work qualification the Ministry of Social Development has offered an NGO Study Award. This has been available now for seven years. Candidates have to apply and there is a process for acceptance. This award is not automatically available. 'The NGO Social Work Study Awards assist non-government organisations (NGOs) to support employees to complete a qualification in social work that meets the educational requirements for social worker registration' (Family & Community Services 2013: 1).

Achieving competency within Family Works Southland

Social workers within Family Works Southland have embraced the goal of achieving competency and membership of ANZASW. Those who have qualifications have used this competency pathway to gain registration. Family Works has been fully supportive of this process. Full payment of fees for membership of ANZASW as well as registration is made by Family Works.

A workshop for prospective competency achievers has been compiled by a team leader that involves showing the difference between the professional membership of ANZASW and the legislative requirements of Social Work Registration. A flowchart was devised that shows the pathways to achieving both. Subsequently the 10 practice standards of the Association are discussed and an exercise is given for groups of 2-3 workers to choose two standards and discuss and write down how they may evidence how they can achieve that standard

within their work practice. This enables them to dispel any fears or blocks they may have in an informal process with people with whom they feel comfortable. It also enables them to discuss further any standards that they may have a difficulty in evidencing. The Family Works cultural advisor speaks with the group on the requirements of evidencing Standard Two, '... that the social worker demonstrates a commitment to practising social work in accordance with the Bicultural Code of Practice and an understanding of the principles of Tiriti O Waitangi' (ANZASW Practice Standards 2008). This process has proven successful in supporting the workers to achieve competency and ANZASW membership.

Registration implications for Family Works Southland

The main purpose of registration is for the social workers to remain competent and accountable (New Zealand Government 2003). There are currently two pathways to achieving competency: through the ANZASW membership process or through the Registration Board's own process.

To become social work qualified in Southland to the level required by the profession, workers have to either move away to the location of their tertiary provider or engage in long-distance learning. The latter is often the choice due to other commitments including financial and family. The two most popular main tertiary providers are Otago University and Massey University. Otago University currently offers a four-year social work degree course with a mixture of fulltime and long-distance study. This has changed in recent years and those employed by Family Works Southland have reported that it has become more difficult to gain a social work qualification if living out of the Otago region. Massey University offers a fulltime four-year social work degree that can also be undertaken extramurally over a maximum of eight years. The MSW applied can be studied extramurally at Massey University and campus courses are compulsory. The Open Polytechnic also offers a long-distance learning social work degree.

For those residing in Southland this long-distance learning is preferred, with some days each year spent on campus attending contact courses. The cost of air travel and accommodation adds to the cost for this option of distance study.

Family Works assists the workers with accessing a tertiary institution and identifying how the costs can be met. The NGO study grant offered by the Ministry of Social Development has been a valuable resource for Family Works Southland. The high level of success for those who have chosen this pathway is evidence of a valuable resource and it is well supported by management. This has enabled current staff to meet their qualification goal.

Registration of social workers and what it means to them can only be measured by speaking with them. The Review of the Registration Act 2003 gave agencies and individuals an opportunity to give input into whether registration should be made mandatory. The result showed that for those who replied 95% supported mandatory registration. Individuals made up 92% of the responses and 8% were agencies and organisations. The main reasons given by those who supported mandatory registration were, '... better public protection ... consistent and universal competency, accountability and ongoing skill development' (Social Work Registration Board 2012: 13).

Whether the objectives of the social worker registration legislation have been met can only be determined by those whom it affects. For social workers within an NGO, their voices need to be heard about the impact of this on their choice of profession and workplace. Anecdotal evidence shows that within Family Works those who become qualified, complete their competency and achieve registration are pleased with their achievement, but have mixed thoughts on the benefits and cost of being registered. Reports of what it means for them include ideas querying whether the agency rather than the individual workers should be registered and carry the accountability responsibility and the pressure for current workers to become registered if registration becomes mandatory. There is also concern that the costs involved are excessive, especially when the salary does not match other registered professions. They however identified that registration should be at a level that guarantees a competent level of practice and this should not be compromised in any way.

Family Works is committed to providing a quality social work service to the families of Southland. For this NGO, the implications of only employing qualified and registered social workers places them in a dilemma. In areas of New Zealand where the qualified social worker pool is small, such as Southland, this becomes a problem. In order to meet their own charter and uphold its beliefs and values, they wish to employ the best people for the jobs. If these people do not have the aforementioned qualifications then it becomes a financial burden on the organisation to train them. Family Works as an NGO relies on donations, bequests and grants as their main source of funding. Individual contracts provide additional funds.

Where to from here?

The White Paper on Vulnerable Children promotes social worker registration for statutory workers, however it does not go so far as to promote mandatory registration across the profession (Bennett 2013). If social worker registration becomes mandatory, then Family Works as an NGO has to weigh up the benefits of having a non-local qualified person within the position who may not have the same local knowledge and commitment to the organisation and charter as opposed to one who has both those but is not registered. The other issue is that once a registered worker is employed or assisted to gain registration then the NGO cannot compete on the salary scale with government organisations and may therefore lose staff.

The NGO faces a difficult dilemma as to where to put its resources. It could invest in training and developing the knowledge base of the newly qualified and registered recruit to Southland or it could financially support the unregistered local person to become registered and maybe eventually lose them to a more highly paid statutory organisation.

Conclusion

Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand has progressed over the years from a helping role for those with a calling to a chosen occupation, to a professional body of workers with a legislated description of their roles and responsibilities. Voluntary registration has now been in place for 10 years. The recent review of the Social Worker Registration Act (2003) recommended mandatory registration. Those who responded to the questionnaire overwhelmingly supported mandatory registration, however this was mainly from the government sector. It is unclear as to whether this recommendation will progress or not.

Family Works Southland, an NGO working with voluntary clients, has a charter developed out of its local heritage. From this base they employ workers who can work with families within these values and belief structure. Family Works supports workers to gain membership of the professional organisation, ANZASW, and where achievable to gain registration. If registration were to be made mandatory, this would impact on the organisation with their financial management, recruitment of staff and loyalty to their charter.

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