

REFLECTIONS ON GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION

**THE PAST**

There was a time when a newly minted MSW who wanted to work with older adults and their families could be assured of advancing her knowledge and consolidating her practice skills through receiving on-site individual and/or group supervision.

As the knowledge base in gerontology increased off-site opportunities for professional development kept pace. Publications and attendance at conferences became adjuncts to agency based educational efforts. It seemed as if it would go on forever until - about a decade ago - everything changed.

The change was over-determined; multiple forces coalescing to form the gerontological supervisory landscape of today. Increased regulations and documentation requirements by contract agencies, decreased funding, increased caseloads, professionals from other disciplines taking the helm of many agencies and the hiring of BA level practitioners to direct service positions all played a part.

**THE PRESENT**

In this pressured environment, the administrative role of supervision (primarily meeting documentation and workload requirements) has come to dwarf all else. Most importantly, the educational role of supervision is frequently "outsourced" to external training programs. Very valuable in their own right as resources for continuing education, they cannot substitute for on-the-job learning where the knowledge that is gained is put to practice.

In too many instances, all that is now known about how to differentially assess and help older adults is not being reinforced on the job with the workers who need it most - front-line practitioners who must cope with the increasingly complex situations posed by their clients:

- the older woman whose hoarding behavior has become a safety issue
- the older man who refuses needed care because of the objections of the mentally ill son who lives with him
- the aging couple whose life-long patterns of bickering are escalating to dangerous levels as they both grow frail

**THE FUTURE**

Is it the social worker's role to intervene in potentially dangerous situations that have not yet reached a "boiling point"? If so, how can she do so while preserving the client's dignity and right to self determination? These are the sorts of practice issues that must be addressed in the field with support and training from a supervisor or mentor who is sensitive to the individual learning pattern of the worker.

The gap between practice knowledge and what is happening in the field of gerontological social work will not and cannot be solved by a return to old ways. A new model of on-site supervision or mentorship is needed - a model that bridges the gap by adapting tried and true on-site supervision practices to present day realities - a model that recognizes agency constraints without succumbing to them.

We need a new model to better serve our clients. We need it to better serve our profession. SBW has developed an Agency Based Resident Trainer model which we hope to disseminate broadly. On the next page is an announcement of a "showcase" of our model training program being held in July - in conjunction with a program of InSight Management Development.

As always, we welcome your comments.

**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. We provide consultation and staff development for agencies, supervision for practitioners and corporate training programs. For more information, please visit [www.sbwpartners.com](http://www.sbwpartners.com) or call 212.337.2555.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS!

SBW Partners and InSight Management Development are co-sponsoring an instructional workshop in July entitled **Communicating for Improved Service Delivery**. As an organization seeking to maintain high productivity and standards of services to older adults, your management and supervisory staff will profit from this workshop led by experienced professionals. To ensure that your particular needs are addressed, we would like you to tell us what topics are important to you.

Perhaps you seek improvements in:

- Training front line supervisors to be mentors as well as “oversee-ers”
- Motivating employees to think for themselves
- Coaching staff to more effectively apply their skills
- Lowering tension and conflict at meetings
- Putting others (e.g. employees, clients, patients, board members, etc.) at ease
- Gaining shared commitment
- Ensuring timely follow-through from staff
- Providing a supportive environment for all staff

Spend this day with us and you will enhance your skills and confidence. Please let us know which of these or other outcomes would make you want a front row seat, and when our workshop is announced we will get you one! If interested, please contact us at [information@sbwpartners.com](mailto:information@sbwpartners.com) or 212.337.2555.

SBW Partners offers individual and group supervision for social workers seeking the LCSW in the field of aging.

Contact Dr. Ann Burack-Weiss at [aburack-weiss@sbwpartners.com](mailto:aburack-weiss@sbwpartners.com) or 212.337.2555 for more details.