SSWAA 2023 Legislative Priorities

I. School-Based Mental Health Services: The mental health needs of students have been growing and have exacerbated recent challenges which highlighted the need for increased mental health funding throughout America’s schools. Alarmingly high rates of mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety have left school-based mental health services personnel overburdened with higher caseloads, yet severe workforce shortages and tight budgets have left schools unable to expand these services quickly enough to meet demand.

• Action Requested:
  ● Support the EDUCATORS for America, Save Education Jobs Act, and other legislative items which provide school districts with the resources to hire and retain LEA/district-employed school social workers and other qualified mental health professionals.
  ● Support the Increasing Access to Mental Health in Schools Act and the Mental Health Services for Students Act, which would provide funding and support for on-site mental health services for youth in schools nationwide.
  ● Define LEA/district-employed mental health professionals to include school social workers.
  ● Ensure that support for student mental health programs administered by LEA/district-employed mental health professionals (e.g., school social workers) is included in any comprehensive mental health reform legislation that is developed.
  ● Recognize publicly that child and adolescent mental health legislation should be addressed as an urgent legislative priority in Congress.
  ● Support telehealth access to mental health and social work services administered by LEA/district-employed mental health professionals.

II. Recognition for the School Social Work Profession: School social workers are the vital link between the home, school, and community, and provide services to support students’ academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health success. They work with school administrators, teachers, students, and families, providing leadership in forming school discipline policies, mental health intervention, support services, academic success plans, and crisis management.

• Action Requested:
  ● Ensure that legislation related to educators and school support staff includes explicit mention of school social workers.
  ● Address the definition of highly qualified school social workers by including in legislation/regulations the requirement of a graduate degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited program and meeting all other state and local credentialing requirements for practicing as a school social worker.
Ensure school social work titled positions are only filled by those who hold a social work degree from a CSWE-accredited program.

Develop legislation that recognizes the importance of the school social work profession and the wide variety of roles we play in supporting students’ academic, social, physical, and emotional needs.

Pass the *School Social Work Improving Student Success Act*, which would provide funding and support for local school districts to increase and develop their school social work workforce.

**III. Federal Funding for Education:** Providing federal funding to support state and local education agencies is critical to ensuring that school social workers have the tools needed to do their jobs and that students have equitable access to resources and opportunities.

- **Action Requested:**
  - Pass legislation that supports full funding of key programs such as ESSA Title I, ESSA Title IV-A, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Examples of bills that provide comprehensive education funding include the Keep Our PACT Act and the IDEA Full Funding Act.
  - Pass the FY2024 Labor/HHS/Education Appropriations bill in a timely manner so students and schools can receive the additional funding they need before the next school year.

**IV. Student and Family Wellbeing:** It is the responsibility of school social workers to advocate for the students we serve, be it on the individual or Congressional level. Issues such as homelessness, hunger, inequitable opportunities, and harmful immigration policies have detrimentally impacted our students at an alarmingly increasing rate. Policies that promote housing and food security, LGBTQIA+ rights, pathways to citizenship, educational equity, and racial justice would have a profoundly positive effect on students’ ability to succeed.

- **Action Requested:**
  - Implement measures that support housing security, efforts for more affordable housing, and rental assistance.
  - Expand support and increase funding for school-provided meals in communities with food insecurity.
  - Pass the Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act and other legislation which fosters educational equity for all students through a social justice framework.
  - Support legislation that promotes culturally responsive restorative and trauma-informed practices in schools.
  - Support culturally responsive restorative disciplinary practices.
  - Protect the rights of LGBTQIA+ students by passing legislation such as the Therapeutic Fraud Prevention Act and by ensuring that Title IX is interpreted to cover discrimination on the basis of sex, gender identity, and transgender status.
  - Create clear paths to citizenship for students with undocumented status, and end immigration policies that are detrimental to child and adolescent mental health.
  - Support legislation such as the School Shooting Safety and Preparedness Act that develops programs and policies to ensure that students and staff are safe.
when at school.

V. Workforce Diversity and Development: School social workers face increased demands in today’s environment and serve an increasingly large and diverse population of students and faculty. Policies should address the quality and quantity of training programs for mental and behavioral health professions and seek to address shortages in the school mental health services workforce.

Action Requested:

- Pass the FY2024 Labor/HHS/Education Appropriations bill in a timely manner so existing federal workforce development programs can receive the additional funding they need before the start of the school year.
- Pass comprehensive mental health legislation that addresses the shortages in behavioral and mental health workforce disciplines, including school social work.
- Fund federal grants to support graduate programs in the mental and behavioral health professions.
- Create tax incentives that encourage and reward mental health professionals to perform services in underserved communities.
- Promote policies that address disproportionality and increase diversity within the school social work workforce.

(NOTE: will create a separate tracking sheet for key bills as they are introduced in the 118th Congress)