



STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF

Social Work Student Contributions to Home Health Care Services

at an Independent Living Facility

This exploratory qualitative study examined staff perceptions of social work student contributions to client services, family and client communication, and staff workload in an independent living setting for older adults. Ten employees who had contact with the students, clients, and family were interviewed using a semistructured interview method. The findings suggest a positive response to the presence of social work students in the enhancement of home healthcare and in this independent living environment. In particular, their contributions were viewed as helpful in client quality of life, quality of care, communication with clients and families, and work performance.

Home healthcare (HHC) clinicians understand the value of interdisciplinary teams and the important role of the social worker in providing comprehensive care to clients. The increase in healthcare services to community based and home settings, and the growth of the aging population create an increased need for social work services in these environments. The lack of social workers

Colleen Galambos, PhD, MSW, ACSW, LCSW, LCSW-C, Julie Starr, APRN, FNP-BC, Katy Musterman, MBA, BSN, RN, and Marilyn Rantz, PhD, RN, FAAN

with gerontological training is well documented (Damon-Rodriguez et al., 2013; Galambos & Curl, 2013). The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects the need for social workers with aging expertise to increase by 19% between 2012 and 2022 (Bureau of Labor Statistics



The positive change in staff, family, and residents' attitudes with the presence of social work students was evident to the nursing care coordinator and social work consultant.

& U.S. Department of Labor, 2014). The Council on Social Work Education responded by developing an initiative to “ensure that social workers, both bachelor’s (BSW) and master’s (MSW), are better prepared to improve the quality of life and enhance the well-being of older people” (Ericson & Tompkins, 2006, p. 226). Part of this educational initiative encouraged partnerships between universities and communities to help prepare social workers to meet the demands of the aging population boom. Educational partnerships with HHC agencies provide an optimum environment for students to learn about older people and healthcare while also benefitting the HHC agency (Dyeson, 2004a, 2004b).

Service learning and internships through college-community partnerships offer opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to enhance learning and to experience the world around them. This type of learning experience is shown to bring about positive change in students’ views of older adults and to enhance knowledge, skills, and competencies. Service learning is often the first step to competency building, followed by the more intensive field placement experience (Galambos & Curl, 2013; Karasik, 2013; Penick et al., 2014).

The presence of students in community and HHC settings is of great benefit to the older adult. The clients are both the recipients of service and active participants in student learning through observation and individual interviews (Folts, 2006). Older adults engaged in collaborative relationships report increased cognitive awareness, increased self-esteem and life satisfaction, improved ability to complete activities of daily living, and an appreciation for the opportunity to share their life experiences with others (Dorfman et al., 2003; Peacock & O’Quin, 2006). One author notes that although field practicum opportunities for students in HHC are rare, social work (SW) students can be a

valuable asset to service delivery in this setting (Dyeson, 2004a, 2004b).

With the enactment of the Affordable Care Act of 2010, there is a concerted effort to reduce healthcare expenditures that may impact the HHC industry. However, Federal Medicaid payments will increase for those states that provide home and community-based services to individuals who are otherwise eligible for nursing home care. This initiative may encourage expansion of HHC in the future (Mason & Gammonley, 2012). In response, new models of care may be the answer to these changes in public policy. The inclusion of social work services in these new models of care will support patient-centered care.

One Midwest aging in place facility successfully offers their clients necessary HHC services, which are delivered in a unique environment. The mission and purpose is to help older adults remain in their homes with the use of HHC and other services. This organization is made up of staff members and volunteers who share in the goal of helping older adults to age in place. Students from various disciplines have participated in service learning activities and completed class projects and internships at this facility. Clients benefit from this student contact and it serves as an additional resource, which enhances existing care and coordination.

The HHC component provides care coordination and home nursing services to these independent living clients. A Registered Nurse (RN) Care Coordinator manages the program and is employed full time at the facility. Nursing and aide services are provided directly by the HHC component. Rehabilitation services, homemaker services, and hospice are arranged by the care coordinator and outsourced through other programs. Prior to 2011, social work services were provided 4 hours a week by a SW consultant. The consultant was only able to attend the most acute situations and the care coordinator was overwhelmed in providing both nursing and so-

cial support to all the clients. In 2011, she had an opportunity to supervise and provide a field placement experience to two second-year MSW students who needed to complete their block placement experience before graduating. Students in block placements are present at their assigned agency 5 days a week, 40 hours a week for an intensive 4-month experience. In this case, the MSW consultant provided the social work supervision, and the RN Care Coordinator provided the day-to-day task supervision. Dyeson (2004a, 2004b) suggested this type of model where the SW student field placements are provided in HHC agencies under the supervision of a licensed certified social worker.

Through this opportunity, the nursing care coordinator realized the value of SW students in her aging in place environment. Prior to these students spending clinical time in the facility, she found it difficult to complete her nursing duties. Much of her time was spent on admission planning, counseling, and encouraging clients to engage in group activities. Once the SW students arrived, she realized she had more time to complete her job because the SW students interacted and assisted the clients with various tasks and worked intensively with the residents' families. She also noticed improvement in both client and staff attitudes. The clients were spending less time in their apartments, were more involved in group activities, and took more meals in the dining room. Housekeeping staff and nurse aides had more time to complete their duties and seemed more positive in their daily interaction with the clients and other staff members. Their ability to communicate with the clients seemed to improve and the SW students were good role models for interacting with clients.

The positive change in staff, family, and residents' attitudes with the presence of SW students was evident to the nursing care coordinator and SW consultant. Based on these observations, they designed a research study to determine if other employees in the facility had observed the same improvements. A review of the literature revealed that there was a limited amount of information available on the topic. It was decided to conduct interviews with the staff to explore staff perceptions of SW students on HHC services at this independent living facility. The aims of this study were as follows:

1. To explore the perceptions of independent living staff members on the contributions of SW

students to client activity and behavior, quality of care, and quality of life;

2. To explore the perceptions of independent living staff members on the contributions of SW students on employee work performance; and
3. To explore the perceptions of independent living staff members on the contributions of social work services on family and client communication.

Methodology

This study uses a naturalistic paradigm to explore staff perspectives on the contributions of SW students on HHC services within an independent living, aging in place setting. Naturalistic inquiry is based on the assumption that there are multiple realities or perspectives of a particular phenomenon. These realities are influenced by a number of factors including but not limited to age, life experiences, education level, and length of time employed at the facility (Glaser, 2004). Major themes, conclusions, and inferences emerged in the analysis of the data, which reinforced the appropriate use of this qualitative design. The use of semistructured interviews allowed the staff to share detailed experiences of SW students' influence in their work environment.

Data Collection

This study used an exploratory design; the criterion for participation were current employment at TigerPlace, contact with the clients at the facility, and contact with the HHC agency SW students. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, employees who had contact with the clients and students were approached by the principal investigator, a licensed MSW with a PhD, or the coinvestigator, a licensed RN, both employees of the HHC service. Employees were asked to be interviewed regarding their perceptions of the SW students on client care within the organization. Ten employees from various departments and disciplines agreed to participate in the study. This number represents half of all of the employees who had some contact with the SW students. All employees who were approached to participate agreed to be interviewed. The 10 employees who participated in the study had the most work contact with the students and were approached based on the fact that they were in a position to observe and

Table 1. Demographic Data of Study Participants (N = 10)

Age (Years)	Race	Gender	Education	Position	Years/Months Worked	Amount Contact	Type Contact
56	C	F	16	Activities	2	A lot	InfoS, ResCon
56	C	F	12+	Activities	2/2	Moderate	InfoS, ResCon
50	C	F	12+	Housekeeping	5/9	Moderate	InfoS, ResCon
26	C	M	16	Dietary	2	Moderate	InfoS, InfoR
23	C	F	12	Dietary	5	Little	ResCon
39	C	M	16	Administration	3/5	Moderate	SA, CP
58	C	F	12+	LPN	2	A lot	CP
38	C	F	12	CNA	2/5	Little	ResCon
50	AA	F	12+	CNA	6/5	Moderate	ResCon
61	C	F	12+	RN	1/6	Moderate	ResCon

Note. Type of contact: InfoS = information sharing; InfoR = discussed client information; ResCon = resident concerns; CP = care planning; SA = student assignments; C = Caucasian; AA = African American; F = female; M = male; LPN = licensed practical nurse; RN = registered nurse; CNA = certified nursing assistant.

interact with the students more than other employees. The other 10 employees were part-time employees or did not have significant contact with the students. Table 1 provides demographic information on the study sample.

Interviews were conducted at the facility by either the SW consultant or the RN Care Coordinator. Prior to obtaining a written and informed consent to participate, each participant reviewed a letter of participation explaining the research purpose and conditions, including voluntary participation. All were provided the opportunity to opt out of the study if they so desired. The majority of the interviewees did not have a supervisory relationship with the interviewer. The data collection format consisted of semistructured interviews that followed a protocol for the interviews developed by the principal investigator. The first part of the interview involved the collection of demographic data. The second part consisted of 10 questions with probes that explored the employees' perceptions of the SW student contributions to staff responsibilities, client/family communication, client behavior, client quality of life, and quality of care. Staff interviews were of 30 to 50 minutes in duration. During that time extensive field notes were taken. The notes were summarized for each interview.

Data Analysis

The principal and coinvestigator analyzed the data independently, reviewed the summaries,

and identified major patterns and themes. The data were then reanalyzed by a research assistant from the University of Missouri. This third reviewer was employed to mitigate any potential bias in the analysis due to the fact that the PI and Co-I were employees of the HHC agency. An initial coding method was used and also incorporated an InVivo coding process (Saldana, 2013). Core categories were identified and formulated around the study aims. In the second cycle coding process, pattern coding was used (Saldana). For all stages, summaries of the principal and coinvestigators notes were reviewed and general themes emerged within the core categories. The three investigators met and reached consensus on emerging themes. All notes, summaries, responses, and demographic data were downloaded into NVIVO-10 for the analysis. Specific themes emerged on the perceptions of SW student contributions in the core categories of client behavior, quality of care, workload concerns, and SW student contributions in the areas of family and client communication.

Findings

In conducting the analysis, findings revealed several clear themes from participants' perceptions about the contributions of SW students in this independent living facility. These themes are reported under the core categories that emerged from the analysis. The categories and themes are listed in Table 2.

Client Behavior

Staff interviewed noticed many improvements in client behavior from SW student contributions, most notably in relation to interactions and expressed feelings. The themes that emerged in this category were *more resident interaction* and *positive resident feelings and mood*. In relation to interaction, staff observed that there was more socialization, and more contact with the clients. The clients participated in more activities, and they were open to other people helping them with their problems. Most of the respondents commented on this increased client and staff interaction, which they believed allowed for development of interpersonal relationships and opportunities for feelings to be expressed. One female staff member in activities described her perceptions about interaction in this quote:

This facility is thinly staffed. It is difficult for any employee to give the residents undivided attention for more than 10 minutes. The student presence allowed for more resident interaction. They could work with the individual, do problem solving, ask questions, figure out what's going on. Do more than just put out fires.

Increased socialization was also obvious as the students successfully recruited the clients to become more involved in group activities. In relation to expressed feelings, respondents observed that the confused residents received more help. They believed that the extra help led to calmer, more approachable residents. The clients appeared happier, more engaged, and less agitated. One female nurse described what she observed in this way

The residents who were having more difficulty before seemed more at ease. Probably because they have had more help as well, with the students.

Quality of Care

Everyone interviewed was of the opinion that the presence of SW students contributed to the clients' quality of care. Emergent themes included *increased socialization opportunities* and *promotion of mental wellness*. Socialization included many different types of activities. Respondent commented on SW students providing more one-on-one communication, assistance with admissions and adjustment to a new facility, and creating resident activities, including weekend activities. They observed that resident activity level increased, contributing to a higher level of well-being. One female certified nursing assistant described this student contributions to care:

The quality of care is a whole package thing. It's a whole team. It has helped the residents to not feel like they are by themselves. The students were here in a moment's notice. A lot of times just talking or visiting took care of the problem at hand without having to call families.

The promotion of mental wellness was a prominent theme when respondents contemplated the contributions of SW students to quality of care. They noted that the students increased the clients' comfort level and helped clients feel less isolated and less lonely. SW students were able to provide additional assessments, which helped the staff understand and know more about the mental health of the client. Finally, respondents identified an important contribution being the ability to address problems as they emerge. One female certified nursing assistant stated:

They (SW students) give us a better idea of what is going on with them mentally which gives us a better idea of how to approach them (clients) and how to care for them (clients).

Table 2. Categories and Themes

Category	Client Behavior	Quality of Care	Quality of Life	Client and Family Communication	Work Performance
Theme 1	More client interaction	Increased socialization activities	Advocate for client	Increased awareness for staff and families	Enhance existing roles and services
Theme 2	Positive feelings and mood	Promotion of mental wellness	Resource for client	Increased support for staff and families	New roles and behaviors

Quality of Life

Clients' quality of life was also thought to improve with the presence of SW students. They were available to meet clients' needs, encourage socialization, and engage in group activities. There was also a noticeable positive effect on clients' behavior and decreased stress as they had an outlet to talk about their concerns. In this regard, themes of *advocate for client* and *resource to client* emerged from the data. In relation to the theme *advocate for client*, SW students were observed as being client advocates. Respondents talked about how the students were available to the clients when needed and how they articulated client needs and wishes when the client was not able to advocate for him- or herself. This type of advocacy is noted in this comment made by a female nurse who refers to an SW student accompanying a client to a physician's office visit.

Getting them treatment when they can't (the client) do it on their own. Being able to be the voice. Social work can go to the doctor's and be the voice.

Respondents commented on the many ways that the SW students were a resource to clients and how this impacted their quality of life. The students were able to draw clients out of isolation and into activities and in so doing, decreased the client's reclusiveness. Clients were not alone as much. The SW students engaged in counseling and interactions with the clients. They had someone to talk to; and the SW students problem solved with the clients, and informed them of opportunities they could take advantage of to help themselves. One male dietary staff member observed:

Their social interactions with the residents were important. Just having someone knock on your door and have a conversation can make their day!

Another comment by a female housekeeper discusses the client resource as an emotional support

They had more venues to express their feelings. Clients expressed their feelings more.

Communication With Clients and Families

There were mixed observations about the contributions the SW students made on communication,

Interview Protocol

1. Have you noticed a difference in the clients' behavior since we have had SW students? Could you tell me more about what you noticed?
2. If you did see a difference, tell me more about what you observed.
3. Have you found it easier to work with clients? Please explain.
4. Has SW students affected the way you carry out your job responsibilities? Tell me more about your thoughts on this matter.
5. Have you noticed a difference with families? Tell me more. With communication? Tell me more.
6. Has family participation increased? If so, provide examples of how you observed this increased participation.
7. In your opinion, have the SW students contributed to the residents' quality of care? Tell me more about your thoughts on this question.
8. In your opinion, how have the SW students contributed to the clients QOL?
9. Have you seen a difference in the way that other staff does their job? I'd like to hear more information about your opinion.
10. Has the presence of SW students reduced your workload? Please explain.

Note. QOL = quality of life; SW = social work.

with more respondents perceiving a stronger contribution with communication between staff and families and between staff and clients. Included in the data was also the perception that students influenced staff communication. Less of a contribution was noted in the communication between client and family. One respondent noted that it is difficult to increase family communication and involvement with families who choose not to be involved with their loved one. Themes that emerged in relation to communication were *increased awareness for staff and families* and *increased support for staff and families*. Awareness emerged from comments related to being more informed, having more knowledge, and creating more opportunities for exchanges of information. The SW students were regarded as being another set of eyes and ears. One female staff member in activities noted how she perceived the increased awareness among the staff.

We were able to know more about the clients, be more aware day to day, and then we could convey more information to the families.

Educational partnerships with home healthcare agencies provide an optimum environment for students to learn about older people and healthcare while also benefitting the home healthcare agency.

Increased support for staff and families was another noted theme. Support could be observed in concrete activities that were planned that increased communication such as family discussion groups and more care plan meetings scheduled. Support was also observed in the type of communication that SW students engaged in such as communication during conflicts, changes in physical or mental status, and during the resident dying process and at the time of death. One male administrator summed up both types of communication in relation to the impact on families in this statement:

Support groups were successful with the families. The SW students worked with the families more and helped them cope with loss and changes in their loved one. Communication was increased and enhanced with families and clients. More care plans were scheduled. Families need it because they need to know what is happening with their loved one.

Work Performance

Overall, respondents identified that SW students contributed to the work performance of employees. Two themes emerged related to work performance. *Enhance existing services and roles* is one theme. The other theme is *new roles and behaviors*. In relation to the first theme, respondents identified that the SW students provided guidance and support to the clients and families, which relieved staff from this intensive counseling work. The guidance and support offered by the SW students, especially in dealing with behavioral issues, allowed more time for staff to complete their assigned duties. The students also assisted staff in their duties ranging from setting up doctor's appointments, answering phones, counseling clients and families, to delivering an occasional meal tray to a client. The students

were viewed as valuable members of the team. One female nurse noted:

I think having them around has relieved our staff of some of the things they were doing. When a patient gets upset and the aide can't sit for long periods, the SW student can go in and sit. It makes things less stressful.

The presence of SW students also provided an opportunity for the development of new roles and behaviors. Respondents identified that the students taught them helpful responses in working with persons with dementia including verbal cuing and how to approach and redirect. SW students contributed a mental health perspective and were helpful in mitigating behavioral incidents. Students were viewed as motivators who encouraged staff to have more positive interaction with clients. Their talents as mediators and resident advocates surfaced and respondents discussed how the students were used more and more in these types of roles. One male administrator noted

For myself, I'm learning how to handle a bad situation. Use them (SW students) as a mediator between me and the resident or the resident's family. Have them (SW students) advocate for the resident.

Perhaps the external status of the students primed them for being assigned these roles. They may have been regarded as having more objectivity due to their status as university students.

In summary, SW students were viewed as strong contributors to the team effort. Their contributions allowed staff to work more efficiently and to give more quality time to the residents.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that students made positive contributions to the care of clients and services provided by the HHC agency and independent living facility. This SW student field placement program was perceived to contribute positively to client quality of life, quality of care, client behavior and communication between clients, families, and staff. The SW students were viewed as a resource and helped enhance employee work roles and responsibilities. The SW students were regarded as resource experts and they helped educate staff on client behavioral and mental health issues. They were able to translate client needs for staff.

Our findings are supported by research in assisted living facilities and home-based primary care, which indicate that those living in independent living environment have improved quality of life, and improved physical/mental health when social workers are involved in patient care (Chan et al., 2010; Fields et al., 2012; Reckrey et al., 2014). Our findings also support the literature on suggested roles that social workers assume in HHC settings; in particular the roles of advocate, team educator, and mental health expert (Dyeson, 2005). Our findings support the literature on the noted contributions of social work to patient care, palliative care, communication (in particular around health status changes), and support to families when those health status changes occur (Dyeson, 2004a, 2004b; Reckrey et al., 2014; Schroepfer, 2011). With good results, the model used in this study supports Dyeson's (2004a, 2004b) model of HHC agency, social work practitioner, and SW student collaborative partnerships.

Because the role of nurses and social workers often overlap in HHC settings, collaboration between these HHC professionals is important to providing comprehensive client care. Although these roles overlap, each discipline has important and unique contributions to client care. Empowerment and the person-centered approach are central to social work training, which positions social workers to proactively engage clients, families, and staff in effective communication. Nurses in HHC environments are responsible for following the care plan, coordinating care, and meeting the needs of the client. Primary attention is given to the improvement of physical functioning and in assuring that all of the patient's needs are met. The partnership between a nurse and a social worker can lead to enhanced care for each client holistically. In this partnership, the nurse is able to focus primarily on physical care. The social worker provides more time and attention to meeting the psychosocial needs of the client and family members. The use of full-time social workers can influence client care, contribute to a holistic approach to client care, and serve as a resource to clients, family members, and employees alike. The timing to focus on such partnerships is imminent as models of care start to change and fiscal trimming continues to impact the healthcare industry (Mason & Gammonley, 2012).



The social work students were viewed as a resource and helped enhance employee work roles and responsibilities.

Additionally, university-community partnerships can be valuable in demystifying care of older adults in all types of home care settings and encouraging new graduates to pursue a career in gerontological social work. Early experience in HHC and independent living environments can help SW students socialize to their chosen profession. It promotes hands-on learning experiences, which allow students to acquire knowledge immediately and within an interdisciplinary context (Waites & Lee, 2006).

Collaborating with educators to provide clinical opportunities for SW students in HHC agencies is also beneficial to home care administrators. Students in field placements and university collaborations make contributions to client care and provide an input of energy, knowledge, and expertise above and beyond what already exists at the agency. Students completing agency field placements also provide the opportunity for HHC leaders to assess the students' clinical skills, knowledge base, and professional maturity for possible recruitment into a social work position. These collaborations create a win-win situation for clients, staff, and especially the HHC setting. Everyone reaps the rewards of their presence.

Limitations of this study are that it is a small qualitative study of one facility/HHC agency. Therefore, the findings cannot be interpreted or generalized beyond this environment. The study focuses on employee perceptions. Different results may be obtained if residents and family members

were interviewed. The dual role of investigators and employees may have influenced study design and analysis. The fact that one investigator was also a supervisor may have influenced the naturalistic nature of the study. Different results may be obtained if investigators had an independent status from the facility. However, the involvement of the investigators in the facility may have added unique insight into both the design and interpretation of the data. The familiarity with facility operations may have added a deeper understanding of respondent answers and comments.

Despite these limitations, this study addresses a void in the literature. There is a lack of research that examines employee perceptions of SW student contributions in an HHC/independent living environment. Additional research is needed that examines both student contributions and social work contributions in HHC settings. These studies should be both qualitative and quantitative in nature with a larger sample size, in different geographical areas, and include client and family perceptions. Our knowledge base will be expanded if such studies were conducted.

In summary, this qualitative study examined the perceptions of 10 staff members in one independent living center/HHC agency about the contributions of SW students to clients, family, and staff. These staff, who represented a variety of functions, articulated that SW students did make positive contributions in these areas. Recommendations are made for the creation of SW field placements in HHC settings and for SW staffing within these agencies. Finally, the benefits of university-agency collaborations are pointed out within the context of this study. ■

Colleen Galambos, PhD, MSW, ACSW, LCSW, LCSW-C, is a Professor and Director Graduate Certificate in Gerontological Social Work, School of Social Work, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.

Julie Starr, APRN, FNP-BC, is an Advanced Practice Nurse, Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Women's Health, Sinclair School of Nursing, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.

Katy Musterman, MBA, BSN, RN, is a Tiger Place Care Coordinator, Manager Nursing Services Aging in Place, Sinclair School of Nursing, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.

Marilyn Rantz, PhD, RN, FAAN, is a Curators' Professor & Helen E. Nahm Chair, Sinclair School of Nursing, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Address for correspondence: Colleen Galambos, PhD, MSW, ACSW, LCSW, LCSW-C, University of Missouri School of Social Work, 7th Floor Clark Hall, Columbia, MO 65211 (galambosc@missouri.edu).

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