

An Authentic Breakthrough for
Teaching Social Policy!

Social Policy for Effective Practice
A Strengths Approach

ROSEMARY CHAPIN

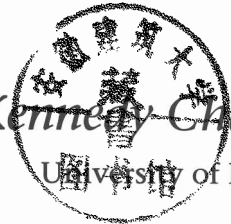
Social Policy for Effective Practice



A STRENGTHS APPROACH

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P R E F A C E



Welcome to the exploration of how social policy will shape your future practice. *Social Policy for Effective Practice: A Strengths Approach* is written for students who will become human services practitioners. It is designed to equip you to understand the processes of defining need, analyzing existing social policy, and influencing new policy. Moreover, the book presents each of these elements using a strengths approach. The premise of *Social Policy for Effective Practice* is that a greater focus on the strengths and resources of people and their environments rather than on their problems and pathologies should be integrated into the social policy development process.

Many social policy textbooks present a fragmented approach to understanding social policy. First, they discuss a variety of social problems. They then present frameworks for policy analysis. Finally, they conclude by reviewing some major social policies and programs. It has been my experience that students come away from a class using such a textbook with a beginning understanding of a variety of social problems and programs but with little idea of how to use what they have learned to understand or shape social policy when they become social workers. In contrast, *Social Policy for Effective Practice* provides an integrated approach to the policymaking process. A clear philosophical base and a common theoretical framework underlie the discussion of each component of the policy process. The focus is on how understanding social policy can contribute to effective social work practice on a day-to-day basis across the gamut of social work settings.

Whether you are in an undergraduate or graduate school of social work or in another helping profession, you will find this book useful as you attempt both to understand and to shape social policy. In my years of work in analyzing, making, and teaching social policy, I have been surprised at the hesitancy of many human service professionals to engage in the policymaking process at either the agency or the governmental level. The very people who are on the front line and therefore could provide valuable perspectives often don't recognize the resources they can bring to the policymaking arena. Just as unsettling, they have little idea of how they might influence social policy. My intent in writing this book is to provide you with clear and concise frameworks for understanding the elements of the policy process that incorporate a strengths approach and to equip you to use these tools to influence social policy.

My aim is to spark your desire to understand and influence social policy. In order to help reach this outcome, I have interwoven four essential themes throughout this book: (1) the importance of thinking critically about social policy, (2) the benefits of using the strengths perspective in policy analysis and development, (3) the vital role social policy plays in all areas of practice, and (4) the absolute responsibility of every social worker to engage in policy practice.

Take a look at the table of contents for this book. The chapter titles reflect content on social policy that is deemed basic for effective social work practice. In Chapters 1–6, we will examine different frameworks for understanding social policy as well as basic tools for analyzing and influencing social policy. We will also consider the influence of history and economics on social policy. Chapters 7–11 will then provide you with a chance to build your skills using basic tools to analyze policies affecting major client groups in a variety of fields of practice. Moreover, each chapter incorporates a strengths approach so that you can begin to consider clients' strengths and resources as well as their needs when evaluating relevant policies. In Chapter 12 the book concludes by looking to the future and considering ideas about how social workers can effectively respond to projected changes in the new century.

Social Policy for Effective Practice is supported by a CD-ROM, *Practicing Social Work*, which includes two interactive case studies. The book is also supported by *The Social Work Library*, which is comprised of online, full-text articles that relate to specific chapters. The SWL can be accessed at www.mhhe.com/chapin1. Additional margin links will guide you to the latest Web resources on the topics discussed. These margin links will give you and your clients access to the most current information about the major policies and programs we discuss.

End-of-chapter exercises will draw on the case studies to illustrate how the information provided in the chapter is directly applicable to social work practice. You can also expand your knowledge of the topics covered in the book through use of *The Social Work Library*.

The rich variety of resources and links provided as part of *Social Policy for Effective Practice* makes it possible to expand or contract the content to fit the variety of timeframes and levels in which social policy courses are taught. No matter what point in your education you are introduced to my text, I hope you will use the range of resources provided here not only as course material, but also as tools with which you will help to shape policy and programs in your chosen practice setting.

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Thank you all for your help and encouragement.

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Social Work and Social Policy: A Strengths Perspective



I'm working with the Thompsons, a homeless family in which the mom works full-time. She is struggling to take care of her two small children, but there is just no housing available in our area that she can afford.

I have an 85-year-old client, Rosalie Pacht, who can still live in the community but needs some help with bathing and dressing. Her children live in other states, and she can't afford formal home and community-based care service (HCBS). All of the publicly funded HCBS programs have long waiting lists. She may end up in a nursing facility because she can't continue to live in the community without services.

Andy, a 21-year-old who suffered a permanent disability in a motorcycle accident, wants me to help him find work. However, many jobs do not provide health insurance, and he is fearful that if he earns more than the allowable income, he will lose his Medicaid benefits.

SOcial work students who are involved in fieldwork face these kinds of dilemmas every day. Some students may become so overwhelmed that they decide social work is just “too hard,” and they leave the field. Even worse, other students decide they can’t fight “the system,” so they tell their clients “There is nothing to be done.” However, you can make a different choice. You can choose to understand and influence the social policies that will shape your practice and your clients’ lives. **Social policies** are the laws, rules, and regulations that govern the benefits and services provided by governmental and private organizations to assist people in meeting their needs. Although the term *needs* can mean different things to different people, social workers define needs as the gaps between existing conditions and some societal standard or required condition. For example, our society has developed standards of adequate

nutrition for children. When children do not have access to a sufficient variety of foods to meet those standards, then their nutritional needs are not being met.

My purpose in writing this book is to provide you with clear and concise frameworks as well as the knowledge, skills, and, most importantly, the desire to become involved in developing social policies that incorporate the strengths perspective. The **strengths perspective** is a philosophical approach to social work that posits that the goals, strengths, and resources of people and their environment rather than their problems and pathologies should be the central focus of the helping process (Saleebey, 1992). In this text, both the terms *strengths perspective* and *strengths approach* are used to refer to this philosophical approach. I believe that a greater focus on people's strengths and resources, a strengths approach, should be integrated into the social policy development process. To begin this learning process, this chapter introduces and critiques some of the basic concepts and frameworks that will be the building blocks of your understanding of policy making. In addition, it explains how the ways in which we define and understand social problems shape the social policies and programs that we develop to address those problems. **Social problems** are concerns about the quality of life for large groups of people that are either held as a broad consensus among a population and/or voiced by social and economic elites (Chambers, 2000). Examples of social problems are drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, and homelessness. Subsequent chapters—particularly Chapters 5 and 6—present detailed information on how social workers can help analyze and develop social policies designed to address these problems. In future chapters, you will also learn about the historical, political, and economic contexts that shape social policy, and about the major social policies that affect our clients.

SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY

Social policies shape the social welfare system of the United States. The term **social welfare** refers to a nation's system of programs, benefits, and services that help people meet those social, economic, educational, and health needs that are fundamental to the maintenance of society. Social policies make it possible for clients to receive benefits and services they may desperately need. When I use the term **client**, I am referring to the recipient of the direct service or benefit provided by the social worker rather than to the taxpayer or policy maker. Taxpayers and policy makers are important constituents, but clients are the social worker's main concern. The terms *client group* and *target group* also refer to the population that is the primary focus of a social policy or program. Therefore, these terms are used interchangeably throughout this book. In this text, we focus primarily on social policies that shape benefits and services for our clients.

Social work can be defined as “the professional activity of helping individuals, groups or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social