**The Past is Still the NNSWM’s Path to the Future**

By Paul Keys, Ph.D., CSWM

Editor’s Note: Articles by Robert Maslyn and Chauncey Alexander about the founding and early days of the National Network have been printed in recent issues of the Hot Sheet. You can read the full text of these articles at www.socialworkmanager.org. The following piece by Paul Keys was submitted in response to these earlier articles. Hear directly from Dr. Keys, at the 14th Management Institute. Dr. Keys and Dr. Leon Ginsberg will present a plenary session about “The Future of Social Work Management.”

Given that everyone else has checked in, I thought it timely to give my perspective on the founding of the National Network for Social Work Managers (NNSWM) as well. However in doing this my major priority is to focus on the future of manager and management needs in social work rather to dwell too much on the past. This indeed was the genesis of the NNSWM and continues to be its reason for being. To focus on the future of social work management though, some sense of historical need is essential.

I will subscribe to Bob Maslyn’s basic account of the founding, and the reasons for founding the NNSWM, with some additional details on the “early days” as an illustration of what continues to be needed in professional social work management. Bob and I actually linked up and planned the future components of the NNSWM in the hallway of the Hyatt Regency Chicago in 1985. Bob was convening a meeting of social work managers that later came to be called the NNSWM at the same time that I had convened a Symposium on Administration through NASW -

Given that the philosophy what it was (and to some extent still is), I was unsuccessful in getting recognition of the work “management” in the acceptance and setting up of the symposium. In his “Early Days” article Bob quite accurately identifies a philosophy that fairly enraged the both of us, that is the calling of what managers do “administration . I agree that this outdated term was and is a concept comes from a lack of understanding of what social workers who are in management – do.

In that now distant hallway, Bob and I both agreed upon three future directions for the network: a) declaring that it was in fact already “organized” and would continue; b) to continue and organize larger meetings (conferences) in the future that recognized the real needs of social work managers, as it did not appear that any others were doing this; c) to begin a book series on “real” management (in social work).

Bob indicates that “in reviewing the historical records, I find that it is less clear why I founded the Network”. I believe that we both saw the need of organizing a structure that met, affirmed, and supported the real management needs of those social work professionals who had achieved this level of leadership. Our focus was on the needs of the higher level of social work managers who, upon achieving this status, had nowhere to go but out of the profession for securing further knowledge and support. (Later, with Dr. Felice Perlmutter’s vision, the Network also prioritized the imparting of skills for social workers who were just entering the first level of supervision, with her very-well attended workshops on supervision at later management conferences).

The Network followed through on these directions. After much soul-searching and planning a second, though smaller, seminar, was organized in 1986, in Washington, D.C. with Leon Ginsberg’s leadership. This was as much a planning session for the future of the Network as it was an educational meeting. A second (or third depending upon one’s point of view) management meeting was held in New Orleans, in 1987 I believe, in concert with NASW, as part of the NASW Professional Symposium series of the time – 450 social workers interested in management attended. This was the beginning of the National Management Conferences that lasted for several years.

At the next in the series of management conferences after New Orleans, there were 700 in attendance. Network organizing sessions were always a part of these conferences. (I won’t go into the battles necessary to establish these conferences as a real management entity). Additionally, with the help of both Mark Battle and Leon Ginsberg, NASW published its first book on management, New Management in Human Services. Felice Perlmutter developed the name on an Amtrak ride to a Network board meeting in Washington, D.C. All three of the Network’s goals were met by 1988.

Bob quite eloquently, and correctly, identifies the “Six Compelling Imperatives for the Founding” [of the Network] in his article: a professional home that did not exist, the support and dissemination of real “management” content embracing the notion of proactive leadership (as opposed to what I would call the “carrying out the orders of others theme” inherent in the still widely used concept of social work administration; a professional home for managers with all of the connotations of support that that entails; the cultivation of a leadership corps that networked and helped each other; the establishment of the fact that a social worker moving into management was still a social worker; the connection of social work and politics (another term typically shunned by mainstream social work at the time1); a continuing structure for support of social work managers; even a home for those, as Bob said, who ventured beyond the management of human services agencies – non-profit management, often outside of mainstream social work, became the major rallying point for these managers; a home for senior social work executives (which we never believed to be an oxymoron). This indeed was “breaking new ground” – as much so then as it still appears to be now.

With respect to the future, I believe that the concept of management in social work still calls for a great deal more development. This is still the future of the National Network. Questions, needs, and opportunities such as the following abound:

What is the juncture of management and politics in the public sector, and what is the professional social work role? Only a few areas have been astute enough to influence new governor’s transition teams to lobby for professional social workers as state agency heads. Social work and the politics of management is, still, a largely unexplored area.

The concept of “futures” has been developed in a number of fields. What is the future domain of social work management? (It was not too many years ago that the idea of social workers in corporate settings was unheard of, organizational development was only the vision of a very few social workers, and I was once told by an unnamed national social work national membership organization that there “is no widespread interest in strategic planning”). With the vision and leadership of only a few, many other future opportunities will exist for professional social workers. Managers are very well suited to recognize, conceptualize, and develop many emerging new areas of practice. Why not have a session at an upcoming Network meeting on futures – the future of MSW management practice?

The role of social work in non-profit management is still rather ill-defined, though other disciplines such as non-profit management have already appropriated major parts of this direction; I actually was not a social work “intern” at NASW as identified in Chauncey’s article, but had already graduated from the St. Louis University School of Social Services, with a number of years of management and executive experience. I was hired as a Staff Associate, and later Assistant Director of Legislation for NASW, to develop the Educational Legislative Action Network (ELAN), perhaps social work’s first nationally-organized effort at politics, and The Advocate for Human Services, NASW’s legislative newsletter. I do however agree with Chauncey’s description of Glenn Allison, at the time NASW’s Director of Legislation, as “one of the great organizers in NASW’s history.”

Read the above-referenced articles by Bob Maslyn and Chauncey Alexander about the founding of the Network at www.socialworkmanager.org.