Why do social service supervisors have so much trouble hiring social workers across rural Minnesota?

What can we do to hire and retain workers in geographically isolated areas?

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Introduction

Good afternoon and welcome!

A little about me…

➢ Associate Professor of Social Work, Minnesota State Mankato,

➢ Research focus: Rural social service work force issues.

And a little about you…

Session Description & Learning Objectives

- This session focuses on current knowledge pertaining to difficulties in hiring and retaining social service providers across rural areas – with special attention to rural Minnesota.

- Learning objectives:

    I. Provide an overview of research on hiring & retaining rural social service staff,

    II. Provide an overview of problems associated with hiring & retaining rural social service staff,

    III. Identify predictors for successfully hiring and retaining rural social service staff,

    IV. Discuss implications of this knowledge – what can we do?

Is hiring social workers across rural areas really a problem?
You Betch'a!

- Problems associated with hiring/retaining social service staff in rural areas are well identified (see Daley & Avant, 1999; Holzer, Goldsmith, & Ciarlo, 2000; Ricketts, 1999; Schmidt & Klein, 2004)

  - Reasons cited for hiring/retaining complications include:
    - Geographic isolation
    - Lack of professional support
    - Burnout & dissatisfaction with workplace

- My research agenda focuses on expanding this body of knowledge.

Brief history & background

- Rural America has a long (and inaccurate) history of being perceived as "idealistic." Rural romanticized, urban "demonized."

- Social work in the 1800's & 1900's in America – response to socioeconomic concerns.

  - Focus on farm management, rural health, social welfare, education, and leadership.

  - Vacillation between "rural social work" and "social work in rural areas."

  - Where are we today?

Background, continued

- Rural population has fallen 75% from 1800 (95%) to 2008 (<20%).

- The erosion of rural populations has resulted in lack of:

    ➢ Social services,
    ➢ Mental health services,
    ➢ Medical services

    Based at least in part by…

    ➢ Lack of health, mental health, and social service professionals.

    There is a continued need to better understand reasons of problems associated with hiring/retaining social service professionals.

Current State of Knowledge on Rural Social Work Workforce

- U.S. Department of Labor (2008) identifies the need for more social workers in rural areas in the future.

- Lack of rural mental health and social service professionals in rural areas identified (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003).

- Overall shortage of social workers in rural areas identified (NASW, 2003).

- Shortage of trained geriatric mental health practitioners in rural areas (Rosen, 2005).

- Rogers et al (1995): Rural social workers need to be more "generalist." Rural social workers also more macro-systems focused versus urban.

- Mackie & Berg (2005): Differences between rural & urban social workers. Each present unique challenges and joys in their work environment:

  - Rural + flexibility, creativity, independence, professional freedom. Rural – dual relationships, lack of resources/funding, isolation, low salary, burnout.

Current State of Knowledge on Rural Social Work Workforce (continued)

- Mackie & Simpson (2007) Bachelor's-level social work students are more likely to seek rural employment if raised in rural environment.

  - In addition, BSW students from rural areas reported:

    - Greater comfort with living in rural environment,
    - Express desire to raise family in rural environment,
    - Feel there is a greater sense of community in rural areas,
    - Want to work to improve the quality of life among rural residents.

- Mackie (2007): Predicting who is more likely to "become" a social worker in rural areas:

  - Raised in rural areas,
  - participated in rural-based practicum,
  - Received education & training in rural-specific content.

Social Work Workforce in Rural and Remote Areas

Based on Mackie (2008a, 2008b) & Mackie (2005) findings, current knowledge about the state of social work in rural areas.

Statistically significant differences…

Compared to urban counterparts, rural social workers are:
- Younger,
- have worked fewer years as social worker,
- Work more hours per week,
- More likely to have grown up in rural area,
- More likely to have participated in a rural-based internship,
- More likely to have studied rural-focused social work curriculum.

Social Work Workforce in Rural and Remote Areas (continued)

No statistically significant differences were found re:

- Gender, Ethnicity, level of education (BSW or MSW)

- Employment setting. Little difference working in not-for-profit (rural = 44%, urban = 42%), for-profit (rural = 26%, urban = 28%), or government settings (rural = 30%, urban = 30%).

- Fields of practice. Little difference working in ~
  - Aging/gerontology (rural = 11%, urban = 8%)
  - Child services (rural = 26%, 24%)
  - Mental health (rural = 46%, urban = 53%)
  - "Other" fields of practice (rural = 18%, urban = 15%)

Social Work Workforce in
Rural and Remote Areas (continued)

- No statistically significant differences were found re:

    - Levels of burnout between rural and urban social workers (Mackie,2008a, 2008b)

        - Using the MBI instrument, rural & urban social workers were *generally* found to not have differences across all sub-scales.

        - HOWEVER, rural social workers do show higher levels of burnout when the variables "*length of time as a social service provider"* and "*number of hours worked per week"* were compared between groups.

        - Conclusion: While little difference exists generally, rural social workers who have been in the workforce longer and work more hours per week (compared to urban social workers) show higher rates of burnout.

Research on rural work force: Supervisor's speak

Rural supervisors were surveyed & asked about hiring difficulties (Mackie & Lips, 2010).

3 Hypotheses tested

1. Differences will be identified in hiring workers based on levels of worker education (degree held).

2. Differences will be identified in the educational degrees supervisors feel best prepares workers for rural practice.

3. Differences in difficulty in hiring workers will be identified based on geographic distance.

Rural supervisor research, continued

- This exploratory investigation included 183 MN social service supervisors (identified through variety of professional lists – convenience sampling).

- Selected out the 7 MSA Twin Cities counties (all other MSAs remained).

- Pencil and paper survey to be mailed to each supervisor.

- Reminder post cards sent one week after survey.

- 104 of 183 surveys returned – 57% response rate.

Methods

Quantitative Data

- – Descriptive, univariate, bivariate, and regression statistics using SPSS software.
- – Researcher constructed survey.

Qualitative Data

- – Open axial coding to find categories and themes from responses.
- – Data analyzed independently by author and student research assistant to enhance inter-rater reliability. Similar themes and sub-themes emerged in each analysis.

Supervisor demographic findings

- Mean age = 50.2 years
- 71.1% female
- 81.9% employed by a county
- 18.1% held BSW degree
- 9.6% held MSW degree
- Mean county population = 34,325
- Mean distance from an
    urban center = 63 miles

Hypothesis One Findings: Educational Levels

- Applying a χ^2 analysis – findings suggest supervisors are not always able to hire their preferred choice of degree holder.

- Supervisors preferred to hire a BSW – but could do so only **47.9%** of the time.

- Preferred to hire a MSW – but could do so only **27.7%** of the time.

$(\chi^2$ (9, N = 88) = 33.59, p < .001)

Hypothesis Two Findings:
Who is best prepared for rural practice?

86% (n = 68) of respondents felt a social work degree best prepared employees for rural practice –

Compared with:
- Corrections (2.5%; n = 2)
- General Human Services (3.8%; n = 3)
- Psychology (3.8%; n = 3)
- Sociology (3.8%: n = 3)

Hypothesis Three Findings: Hiring Difficulties and Distance

Application of regression analysis found a statistically significant relationship between hiring difficulties and distance:

For every 10 miles moved away from an urban center there is a 3% increase in difficulty of hiring workers.

Variable	B	SE	β	t
Distance in miles from Workplace to pop. >50,000	-.003	.001	-.222	2.07*

*p = <.05

Illustration of Distance Data

From Mankato, MN to:

New Ulm
o **30 miles (increase of 10%)**
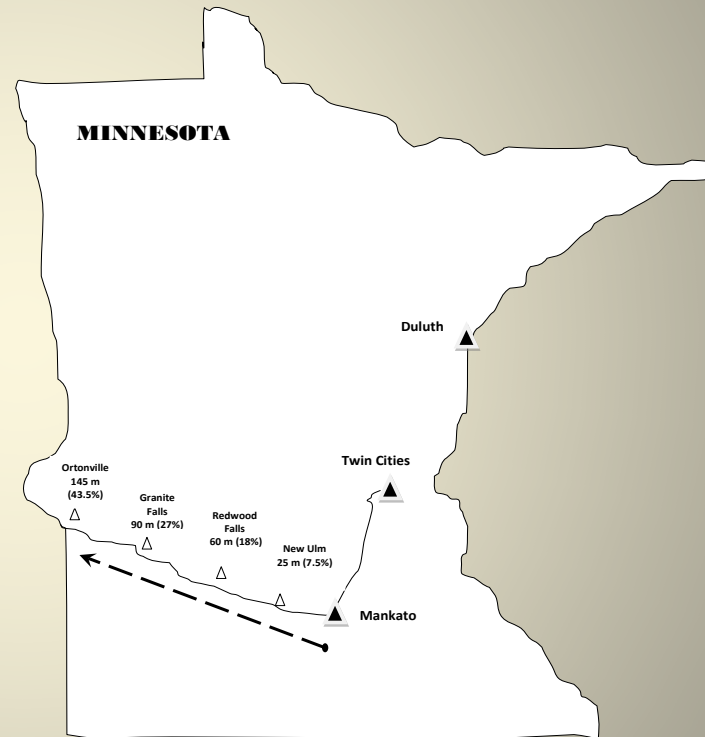
Redwood Falls
o **72 miles (increase of 22%)**

Granite Falls
o **117 miles (increase of 35%)**

Ortonville
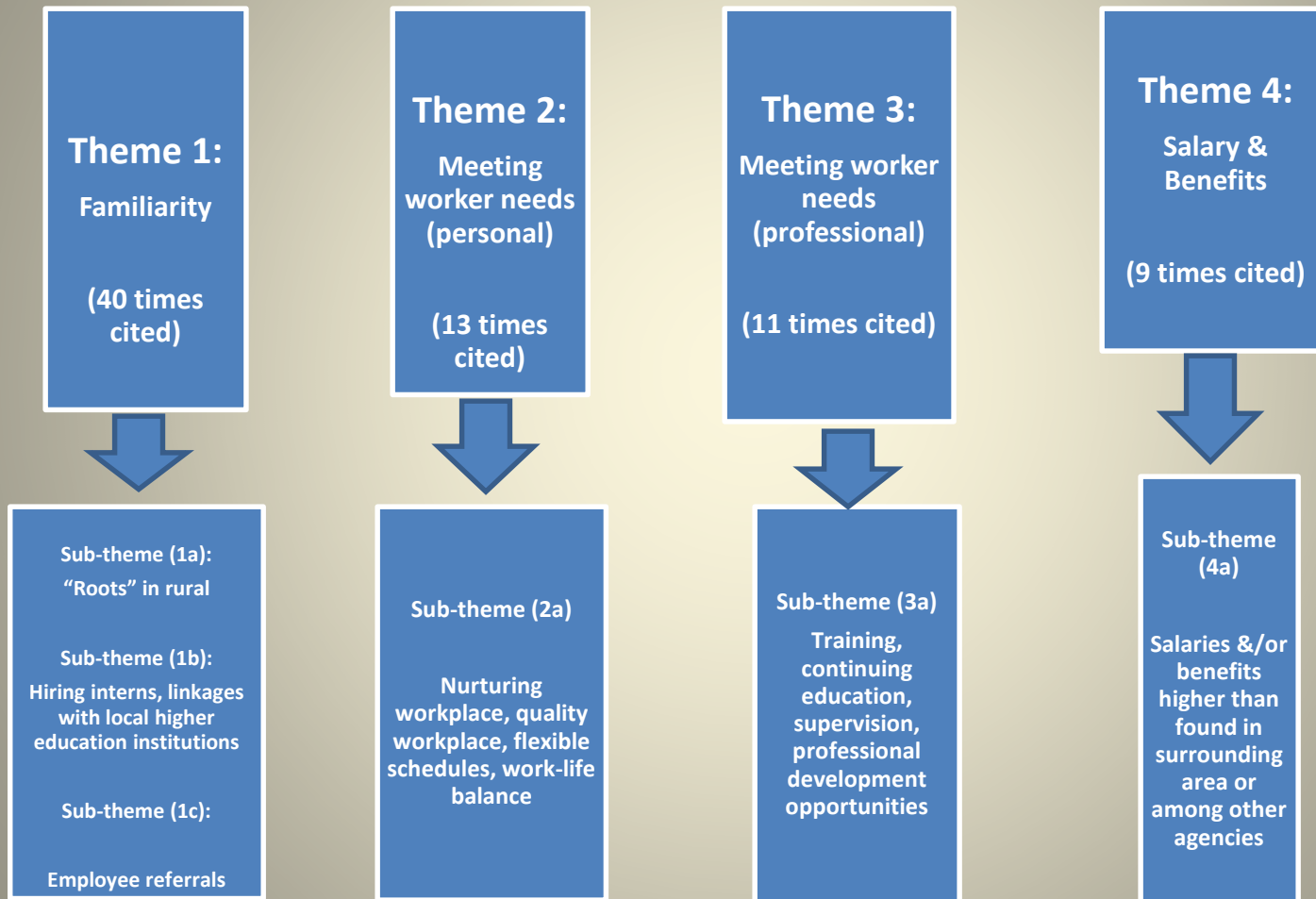o **180 miles (increase of 54%)**

Note: distance measured using: http://mapquest.com

Qualitative Data:
Successes in Hiring Rural Workers

- Theme One: *Familiarity*

- Theme Two: *Meeting worker needs (Personal)*

- Theme Three: *Meeting worker needs (Professional)*
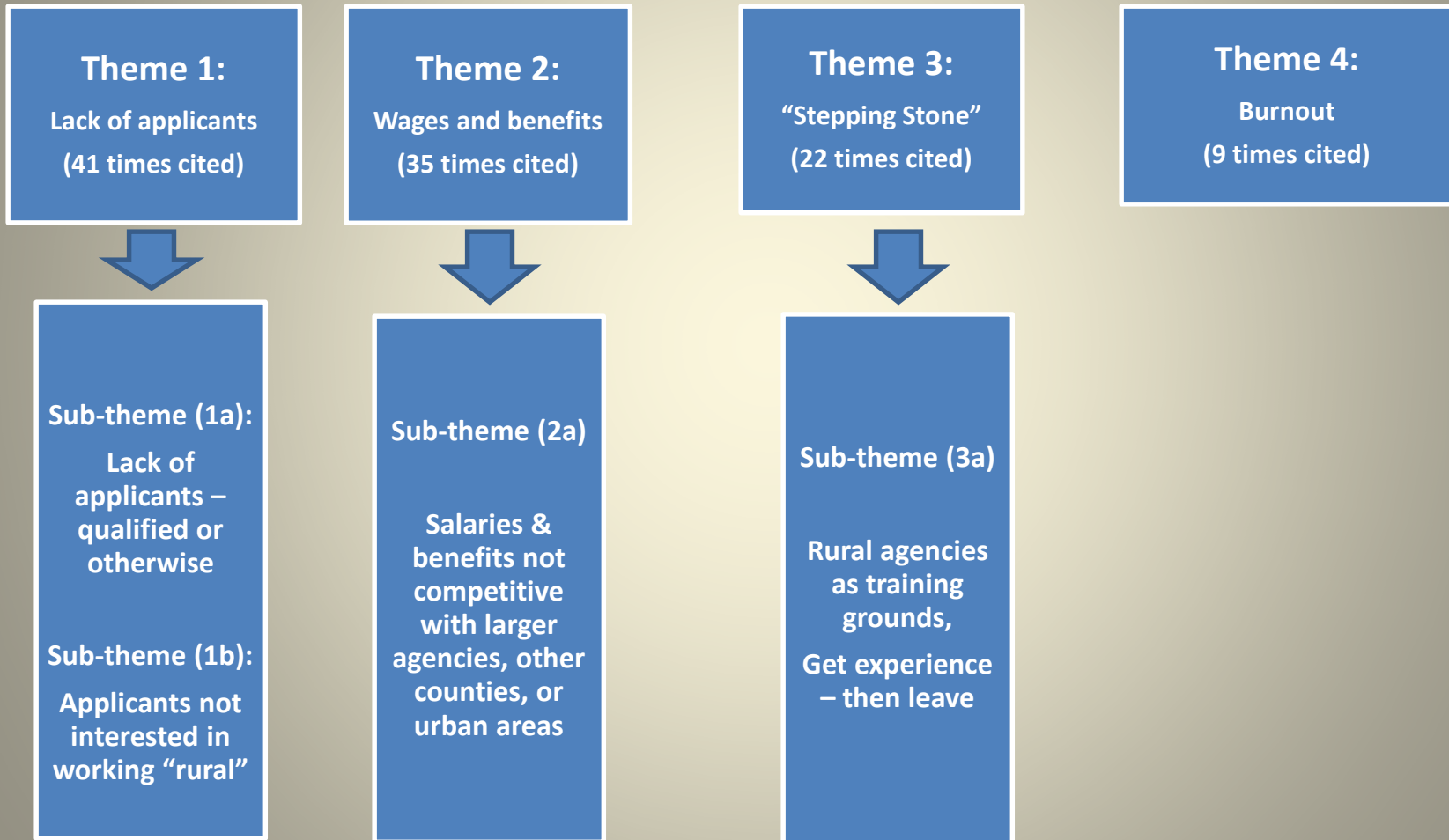
- Theme Four: *Salary and benefits*

Successes in Recruiting & Retaining Rural Staff

Theme 1:

Familiarity

(40 times cited)

Theme 2:

Meeting worker needs (personal)

(13 times cited)

Theme 3:

Meeting worker needs (professional)

(11 times cited)

Theme 4:

Salary & Benefits

(9 times cited)

Sub-theme (1a):
"Roots" in rural

Sub-theme (1b):
Hiring interns, linkages with local higher education institutions

Sub-theme (1c):

Employee referrals

Sub-theme (2a)

Nurturing workplace, quality workplace, flexible schedules, work-life balance

Sub-theme (3a)
Training, continuing education, supervision, professional development opportunities

Sub-theme (4a)

Salaries &/or benefits higher than found in surrounding area or among other agencies

Qualitative Data:
Challenges in Hiring Rural Workers

- Theme One: ***Lack of applicants***

- Theme Two: ***Wages and benefits***

- Theme Three: ***"Stepping stone"***

- Theme Four: ***Workplace Burnout***

Challenges in Recruiting & Retaining Rural Staff

Theme 1:
Lack of applicants
(41 times cited)

Theme 2:
Wages and benefits
(35 times cited)

Theme 3:
"Stepping Stone"
(22 times cited)

Theme 4:
Burnout
(9 times cited)

Sub-theme (1a):
Lack of applicants – qualified or otherwise

Sub-theme (1b):
Applicants not interested in working "rural"

Sub-theme (2a)

Salaries & benefits not competitive with larger agencies, other counties, or urban areas

Sub-theme (3a)

Rural agencies as training grounds,

Get experience – then leave

Limitations of supervisor research

- Exploratory and convenience sampling based, should not be generalized,

- Distance self-reported; unable to confirm actual distances from MSAs,

- Based solely on self-reported data which may lead to over or under-reporting,

- Respondents largely county social service supervisors (81.9% of sample),

- Lack of ability to further investigate open ended questions.

- Effects of social work programs in rural areas (between MSAs) not measured*

Geographic limitation

The effects of social work educational programs in "less urban" locations were not measured.

Examples:

Duluth to Bemidji = 142 miles.

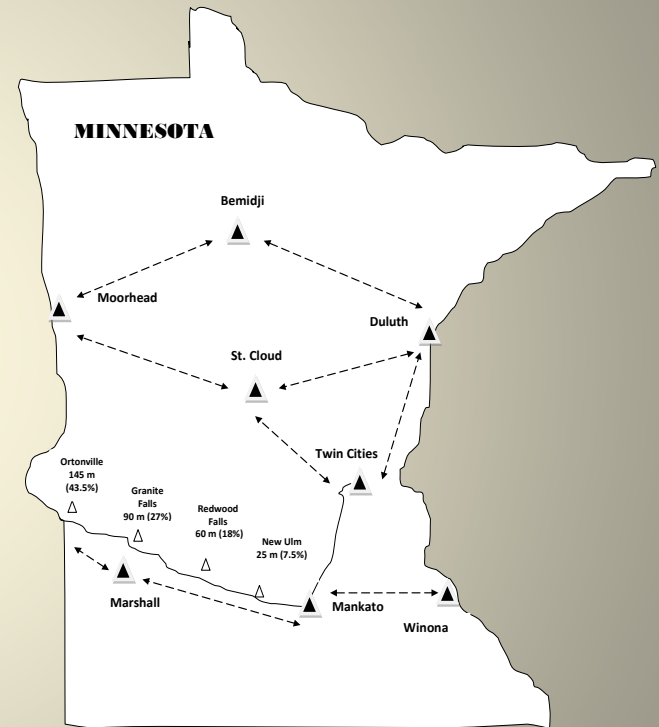Duluth to St. Cloud = 135 miles.

TCs to St. Cloud = 60 miles.

Mankato to Marshall = 91 miles.

Mankato to TCs = 65 miles.

Marshall to Ortonville = 67 miles.

What are the effects of social work programs in rural areas on geographic data?

MINNESOTA

Bemidji

Moorhead

Duluth

St. Cloud

Twin Cities

Ortonville
145 m
(43.5%)

Granite
Falls
90 m (27%)

Redwood
Falls
60 m (18%)

New Ulm
25 m (7.5%)

Marshall

Mankato

Winona

Rural supervisor research conclusion

- Nearly 50% of the time the most desirable applicant (BSW) are not hired (supervisors hire non-social work degreed workers instead). When supervisors prefer to hire MSWs, they can only do so 28% of the time.

- Clearly a measureable effect of hiring difficulty based on distance from urban centers exists,

- Higher education institutions may play role in helping address this concern:
  - Recruitment
  - Internship placement

Recruitment and Retention Concerns

- Based on information provided, recruitment and retention of rural social workers appear to be influenced by the following:

  - Lack of social workers interested in working in rural regions,
  - Lack of professional development opportunities,
  - Salary,
  - Lack of professional growth opportunities,
  - Lack of agency resources,
  - Dual relationships,
  - Isolation.

<u>NOT</u> lack of employment opportunities.

Suggestions for the Future

- Enhance state and federal loan forgiveness programs to support education and professional development for rural social workers.

- Increase funding & support for mental health professional shortage areas (scholarships similar to Title IV-E Child Welfare assistance, dedicated internships).

- Social work education: Increase rural focus within rural social work curriculum, program design, & learning objectives.

- Identify and address recruitment and retention barriers in your area. Develop plan to recruit based on local and regional needs.

- Enhance and ease access for social workers in National Health Service Corps loan repayment program – where can resources be best delivered?

- Strategic recruitment – focus on those found more likely to seek out rural employment. Where? Schools, job fairs, county fairs, regional professional and social gatherings.

- Create/expand social work practicum opportunities for BSW/MSW students.

- Seek balance in the workplace. Social workers who rated higher in job satisfaction reported having greater "balance" between home, work, and play than those who did not feel they had "balance."

Conclusion

Staffing social workers in rural areas continues to be problematic. However, based on what we currently know, we might be able to increase the labor force if we –

- Develop strategies to recruit future social workers from rural areas.
- Support social workers in rural areas with enhanced financial support and educational opportunities.
- Focus social work education on rural-specific issues.
- Increase professional development opportunities and continuing education/training in rural areas.

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