

# Strengthening Families through Para Professionals in the Social Service Workforce

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Nathan Linsk, Ph. D.  
Global Social Service Workforce Alliance  
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# What are Para Professional Social Service Workers? Some definitions

- *Para Professional* --A person to whom a particular aspect of a professional task is delegated but who is not licensed to practice as a fully qualified professional. (Oxford Dictionaries). A worker trained to perform certain functions, as in medicine or teaching, but not licensed to practice as a professional (Webster's New World College Dictionary)
- *Para Social Worker/Para Social Service Worker*-- Supervised paraprofessional staff and volunteers – often community based – which serves the needs of children and families, particularly where social welfare systems are underdeveloped or severely stretched  
(adapted from Linsk, et al., *Children & Youth Services Review*, 2010, used by PEPFAR in defining Para Social Work as an indicator)

## What are Para Professional roles in providing services to vulnerable populations and their families?

- Identifying vulnerable populations at risk, especially vulnerable children, families and people infected or affected by HIV/AIDS
- Establishing a relationship with those in need of service
- Assessing strengths and needs
- Developing service plans
- Providing supportive counseling or psychosocial support, especially in times of crisis
- Linking clients to services and following up through case management
- Providing ongoing support and problem solving
- Documenting service needs and service provision
- Providing service according to their abilities and training, obtaining consultation, assistance or referral as needed

## Engaging Para Professionals to fill gaps for Vulnerable Children and Families—One story

- In 2006 I was asked to go to Tanzania to develop a collaboration with the Institute of Social Work to strengthen their programs and begin to encourage faculty to do more community-based training
- We developed a Twinning partnership with American International Health Alliance to work on this and began a series of faculty exchanges, curriculum work and mentorship
- The Department of Social Welfare of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare asked for assistance in training social welfare officers in psychosocial approaches, HIV issues and documentation



- We developed a program in March of 2007 to focus on serving vulnerable children and families
- USAID came to our early programs and called for expanded programs to train para-professionals at the community/village level

## Engaging Para Professionals to fill gaps for Vulnerable Children/Families

- This program, later dubbed “para social work,” became incorporated into an ongoing system of training, support and monitoring as a way to meet workforce gaps and improve services
- A longer term training component was added to train social welfare assistants to work at ward level and supervise para social workers
- To date over 4800 para social workers and supervisors have participated in the program, over 2500 have completed the overall training program and are placed at the village level.



This story highlights a number of issues related to the social service workforce and how para professionals can be engaged to meet needs of vulnerable populations, as well as provide a career ladder for the social welfare system.

# Creating a Career Ladder for the Social Welfare System- Tanzania Example

## Career Ladder



**Social Welfare Officer**  
(District Levels)

- Advanced Diploma or BSW or equivalent
- Employed at Government Level
- Legal Responsibilities include child protection, oversight of facilities, foster care, placement (Child Act)
- Supervises Social Welfare Assistant

**Social Welfare Assistant**  
(Ward or Village Levels)

- Completed 1 Year Accredited Certificate
- Para Social Work experience or equivalent
- Work under supervision of Social Welfare Officer and perform related services
- Supervises Para Social Workers

**Para Social Worker**  
(Village Level)

- Complete 3 part PSW Training
- Provide direct services—outreach, assess, service plan and case management



# Para Professional Interest Group

- Identified as priority area in initial Alliance planning
- Initially convened last October. Currently there are 22 participants on our member list
- Developed survey of interested participants to highlight key issues. Group saw advocacy, sharing experiences across countries, and developing competencies of para professionals towards standards of how to best deploy para-professionals as initial concerns
- Group decided to develop a set of principles for para professional social service workers as well as worker functions, competencies and implications for programs and training.

# Types of Social Service Para Professionals & Levels of Intervention :

## Focus on 3 groups (names may vary by location)

**Substantial overlap between the three groups particularly where there are multiple para professionals serving these needs**

### **Para or Auxiliary Child And Youth Care Workers**

focus specifically on the life space of individual children and families and seek to enrich and solve problems in their situation

**Para social workers** may focus more on systems levels to identify children or other vulnerable populations at risk, assess needs and strengths and develop a service plan including direct support but may also include coordination of services with other resources where they exist or can be brokered.

### **Para Professional Community Development workers**

intervene with some specific focus on community levels, which may include economic empowerment, engaging community stakeholders and the like on behalf of these vulnerable groups.



## Challenges for Para Professionals in the Social Service Workforce and Principles to Address them (from Workgroup)

- **Attracting and retaining qualified workers to the Social Welfare System**
  - **Trained para professionals work at the community level may fill gaps to support the development of effective services where they are most needed**
- **Ensuring adequate opportunities to prepare for and meet demands to serve vulnerable children and families**
  - **Linkage to future employment and educational opportunities**
  - **Certification recognizing competencies, functions and occupational standards of para professional social service workers**

## Challenges and Principles, continued

- **Developing workforce staffing plans and schemes of service, job descriptions, etc. at government & local levels**
  - **Para Professionals are recognized and have access to a career ladder allowing para professionals to realize their interests and talents**
  - **Government and private sector have clear descriptions of functions, roles and the skills necessary to fulfil the responsibilities**
- **Providing training including harmonizing of curricula across projects, accreditation and training resources**
  - **Training of para professional social service workers uses participatory adult learning approaches and draws from indigenous knowledge and experience based on specific national and cultural contexts**

## Challenges and Principles, continued

- **Ensuring incentives for ongoing work and resources including materials and resources as well as compensation**
  - **Incentives, compensation and recognition should be given to para professional workers for the work they are doing as well as how to sustain their work over time**
  - **Financial and material resources needed to complete work assigned (salaries, supplies, transport, support)**



## Challenges and Principles, continued

- **Ensuring ongoing supervision and management structures with ongoing responsibility for infrastructure and support**
  - **Para-professionals must work under supervision of qualified professionals**
  - **Supervision and support mechanisms create positive linkages between para—professional and professional social service workers.**
- **Documenting Para Professional Social Service Worker achievements and outcomes**
  - **Monitoring, evaluation and research should demonstrate the impact of para professional social service worker**

## How can we share promising practices and overcome challenges in deploying para professionals?

- Using Global Alliance as a resource
- Idea sharing among Alliance members through webinars, blog postings and interest groups
- Advocating with government and civil society organizations to utilize para professionals in appropriate roles
- Establishing guidelines for para professional functions, competencies and expectations—hope to do a future webinar.
- Recognizing para professional practice is a first step on a career ladder to professional credentials and that a para professional moving on to education or a higher level job is a successful outcome
- Collaborate with Professional Schools on curriculum, certification, managing infrastructure (Social Work, Community Work, Child & Youth Work)
- Including para professionals as associate members in professional associations.