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The Conversation: An Innovative Internship for Generalist-Year MSW Students

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[Editor's Note: This issue's Conversation features an interview by Nancy Blumberg, MSW, with Anthony Serio, MSW, and Sharon Gunda, MSW. Anthony Serio is the Assistant Director of Youth and Family Services for the Town of Lexington, Mass. Sharon Gunda is the Outreach Coordinator for the Town of Lexington Human Services Department.]

Nancy Blumberg: Hello, Tony and Sharon. Thank you so much for taking the time to have a conversation about the innovative work that's being done at the Lexington Community Center.

I'm sure our readers will benefit from learning about how social work is integrated into your community and how this could be replicated in their own communities; and, for this particular audience, how this might provide a rich field education opportunity for our students.

As we all know, the field of social work has changed so much during the 21st century. For example, with the many changes in healthcare and health policy, hospitalizations for behavioral health concerns have become available only for those with acute and complex needs. As a result, the need for enhanced social work services in the community has increased dramatically.

Those of us working in social work field education have been excited to learn about the addition of social workers in municipal settings, and have appreciated the robust learning opportunities available to our students.

Your website describes the Lexington Community Center as a “multigenerational, multicultural, and inclusive space.” Could each of you talk about how you came to practice social work in a municipal setting, and the social work roles within the Lexington Community Center?

Anthony Serio: I was connected to the town of Lexington through the former director of Youth and Family Services for the town of Needham. I had done a good amount of family therapy, and wanted to continue to focus on working with families in a broader context. This role also afforded me the opportunity to expand into the more mezzo and macro realms, broadening my skills as a social worker.

Our role is incredibly dynamic, and allows us to engage in varied roles in our support of the community. I would say that it's a dream job for me because I can do clinical social work, case management, lead groups, and develop a variety of programs to meet a wide range of needs. It's really just been an incredible experience. The Community Center is a place that allows us to provide multiservice programming opportunities. It's a rich resource for our community.

NB: Thank you, Tony. It's exciting to hear about your professional path, and how your role at the Lexington Community Center has allowed you to grow in the profession. Sharon, what has your experience been?

Sharon Gunda: I had been working in the field for 15 years, working with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and I just really wanted something new, different, and challenging.

Like Tony said, it's a dream job for a social worker. We are able to work in so many different settings, with individuals of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds, as well as their families. We also work with the town government, the select board or town manager, the police, and fire departments. The scope of roles and their resultant impact at all levels is exciting.

NB: Municipal settings have not historically been considered traditional social service agencies, yet the role of social work is growing in these settings. Can you talk about the history of the development of the social work role at the Lexington Community Center in particular, and this municipal role for social workers in general?

AS: The Human Services Department in Lexington has existed for quite some time. But

there were a number of events in the community that led to a Mental Health Summit. Sadly, in 2012, we had a series of teen deaths by suicide. As a result of that, the public schools, the Health Department, and the Human Services Department, in partnership with Riverside Community Care (a local behavioral health/social services agency), had run a series of meetings with the Board of Selectmen and the School Committee to determine what additional services were needed and how to improve mental health services for the town. That process started in 2014.

As a result of the 2015 Summit, the Community Center was expanded and a decision was made to locate the Human Services Department offices in the Community Center, which now includes senior services, human services, and a variety of programs for community members.

Although the Commonwealth of Massachusetts law mandates a Council on Aging in each city and town, the service delivery looks very different depending on where you live, and depends on not only the budget for the town, but the needs of the town. This gets into a much more complicated and different discussion about access to needs according to resources, which we all know is not evenly distributed for those who need the most. Nothing has highlighted that more than the pandemic that our world is enduring.

This is a model that is growing across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, with municipalities realizing the need for these additional resources. This presents an opportunity for all communities to bring a different lens to the struggles of individuals and families, and scaffold supports before problems occur.

NB: Sharon, can you talk a little bit more about your role in the Lexington community?

SG: My role is two-fold. One is the outreach portion, informing the residents of Lexington that the Human Services Department exists, and letting them know what we do and how we can assist them. That involves my going out, speaking to various groups, and just letting people know about our services.

The other part is clinical work. I see residents across the lifespan. Tony's focus is more on youth and families. We have an assistant director for senior services. She sees more seniors; that's her primary role.

On any given day, I could be meeting with a senior about transitioning from their home to an assisted living or a nursing home, trying to figure out plans about the next phase of their life. I could be meeting with a young family about issues in the school and collaborating with guidance counselors about that family.

It makes my role very unique, because I get to see people at different stages in their life. I am able to help Lexington residents with many different challenges, as Tony was mentioning, including housing and financial issues. We also address mental health difficulties, and we can be addressing all these issues within one family. It's an opportunity to look at the whole family in the context of their environment. We also provide robust services for our immigrant families.

NB: Thank you Sharon. You both speak of the richness of the role for those who are experienced social workers. The scope of the role is one that also seems to lend itself to a robust learning experience for a social work intern. The exposure to such a variety of populations, with such a variety of needs—and all in the context of a community—provides a natural and rich “stage” for generalist-year students to learn about communities and the “person in environment” in a powerful way.

As you know, it is so important that our students also learn how to work across difference. Do you see these opportunities for students?

SG: Lexington, according to census data, has about 33,000 or so residents, correct me if I'm wrong, Tony. As far as race is concerned, it's about 65 percent white, and about 29 percent Asian, African American, and other mixed races. And other races make up the remaining 6 percent of the population.

Lexington is a fairly affluent community. However, there are some residents who are below the poverty line and are struggling with complex financial issues. We are fortunate to be in a resourced community positioned to help in a substantial way.”

NB: Simmons interns have really appreciated the opportunity to learn with you at Lexington Community Center over the past few years. Tony, you have specifically mentioned that your agency is a good fit for generalist-year students. Can you speak a little bit more about the opportunities for first-year students? For example, when you're first meeting an intern, what do you talk about, and how do you integrate social work interns into the fabric of your setting?

AS: I'll start by saying there are so many different things that we end up doing over the course of a year with an intern. I really try to meet the student where they are. First-year social work students come into the field with their own unique backgrounds and interests. It's important for me to understand their passions and learning goals as we are so able to tailor their experience over the course of the year. I can share some of the learning opportunities available at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

With our previous intern, we offered a small caseload, three to five families, that they followed throughout the year. They had the opportunity to co-facilitate some

community trainings, specifically Question, Persuade, and Refer Training (QPR), and Suicide Prevention Training.

We designed and delivered a couple of workshops in partnership with some other local agencies. They helped facilitate a holiday program—a big undertaking each year—to help families that are eligible for Fuel Assistance. The same intern completely revamped our resource guide, and helped me develop and lead the teen drop-in group at the local library.

The student was also able to join us in our work with the police and fire departments, learning the consultative role of a social worker. There is also a group called the Community Crisis Intervention Team that meets on a monthly basis to talk about preventive ways to address ongoing issues that are happening within the community—needs that are, of course, far more pronounced during a global pandemic.

Finally, but not exhaustively, our social work interns are able to get involved in the Human Services and Human Rights Committees, and observe the social worker's role in making recommendations based on the needs of the community at any given time. We also help students practice short-term interventions, including solution-focused therapy, with their families. I think it goes without saying that students are immersed in honing their engagement and assessment skills at all levels—with individuals, families, organizations, and communities.

I know that's a long answer for you but I think the point that I'm trying to make is that our municipal setting can provide an intern experience in most any area of interest!

NB: I appreciate your flexibility in thinking about how to tailor an internship for a student—it is really remarkable. It speaks to a foundational concept of social work practice—that is, “start where the client is.” Skills of engagement and assessment provide a crucial foundation for our students, and it is so exciting to hear that students in municipal settings like yours can engage and assess not only with individuals and families, but with groups, organizations, and the community as a whole.

AS: One last thing, unfortunately, is the impact of being in the midst of COVID-19. As we work with families in crisis, our work has accelerated to accommodate the growing needs of families during this time, especially in the financial realm. It's interesting to think about how to develop a therapeutic alliance with families in addition to providing concrete needs—especially for those families who find themselves in a situation that they would never have expected—in a crisis. And crisis work is always a great learning opportunity for interns.

NB: Agreed. I think it also speaks to the impact of providing concrete or case management services, something that students tend to assume are not as “clinical.” In the situation you mention, students can learn how the provision of financial assistance, for instance, can provide an opening to engaging with a family around a more complex set of needs when relevant.

To continue with the topic of COVID-19 for a moment, it feels important to ask how your work, and the engagement with your intern, has been impacted. Many of us are working from home and I would imagine the isolation (and possible losses) for those in your community has had an impact.

SG: For me, working during this pandemic has been a learning experience, and no doubt for our students as well. In my role, I normally would not be engaging with community members virtually. My usual practice is to visit people in their homes, in the office, or somewhere in the community. For some of our community members, this poses quite a challenge. An example of a challenging case I've been working on involves a 92-year-old woman who is not familiar with the technology, and that has been a particular concern. I need to be able to see her, and speak to her in person, because she's hard of hearing.

However, it hasn't all been negative. Some opportunities have presented themselves. For instance, I run a caregiver support group once a month, and I've actually seen an increase in numbers. People who are not usually able to leave the house because of their caregiving responsibilities are able to access our support. Some of them have even asked, “Can we just continue this way going forward?” We're looking at ways to make that work. We've certainly learned things that we never would have imagined.

AS: I would agree with much of what Sharon has shared. The virtual world has made our help more accessible to some, but there's something to be said about feeling that sense of privacy in a room alone with someone. Unfortunately, that has come up for some folks who do not feel comfortable disclosing personal information in this way. That's been the biggest challenge for me. How, I wonder, do I help a family that's already in crisis, that needs financial assistance and other forms of support, but who do not feel comfortable disclosing certain information to me over the phone or a virtual platform? It calls us to be creative.

I should add we are also very fortunate because our department received a quarter-million-dollar donation from a pharmaceutical company, to help families who have been impacted by COVID-19.

NB: What an incredible contribution, and likely so helpful to families in your community. It's wonderful that you've been able to quickly adapt to the environment

and creatively meet the needs of your community – and, in some cases, provide access to those who might not have had such access previously. I think we are all amazed at what we have learned about the ways in which technology can help, and it is no small feat to think of doing this at the community level, all the while still training a student!

Sadly, we all know there are two pandemics that are occurring in our country, the coronavirus as well as the pandemic of institutional racism and racial tension that is now exploding in our country. The police, a group that you work closely with, are a group under close scrutiny during this time, and a structure that has been in the spotlight as one that needs reform. How is this impacting your community, and your work? I would add that this is a context that provides much to process as you teach your student.

SG: Institutional racism is everywhere. This is a societal problem. It's everywhere, and Lexington is certainly not exempt just because it is a more affluent town. There have been hate crimes in this community that is predominantly White and privileged. It is, however, a community engaged in a conversation about race. The Human Rights Committee, the Select Board, MLK Day Subcommittee, and LexPride, to name a few, are immersed in this issue by providing programming and hosting events, but there's always more work to be done. Tony can also speak to some of the things that he's worked on recently.

AS: Absolutely. In addition to the things Sharon mentioned, the town created the Diversity Advisory Task Force in 2017, which is a partnership of the town and the schools to address multiple areas of systemic racism across the town, whether in town departments, the schools, the library...you name it. There's a very conscious effort by the town, doing its due diligence to make sure there is equal opportunity and equal representation. We also have a very passionate community group called the Community Coalition that works closely with the schools and with a number of community partners like the Human Services Department. Our pride-based group, Lex Pride, is another group with whom we are very engaged, developing programs and identifying the work to be done. They started a campaign called #Lex4RacialJustice, another important community voice. We've had state representatives, community leaders, the Association of Black Citizens of Lexington group (ABCL), each publicly making their pledge to end racism. The Community Center takes a role in all of this activity.

The point is, we interact with various groups around town, and are very aware that systemic racism is here, in our town, and everywhere; we're making a commitment to bring about change. This is all content that our student interns can (and do) integrate into their learning. And, of course, part of the "conversation" always involves the role that the privilege of this community plays.

NB: I appreciate that. It's good to hear that some of these groups have been ongoing. Awareness and unrest have exploded in our country, and it is good to know that the town of Lexington and the Community Center have been actively working on issues of antiracism.

AS: Black lives matter.

NB: Indeed, Black lives matter.

We touched on this earlier a little bit, Tony, and either of you should feel free to answer. What would you say to social workers who are reading this conversation and thinking they might want to explore the possibility of integrating social work interns into their municipal role in the community? Any words of advice or tips on how to get started?

SG: This is a growing model of practice across the Commonwealth and elsewhere. For the communities that do not have a social worker, I wonder what they are waiting for—every community needs a social worker.

NB: Thank you so much, Sharon, for putting it that way. It's true. What are we waiting for? There is so much opportunity for students to learn in this setting.

SG: Absolutely. It's a unique opportunity for sure. As we talked about the micro, the mezzo, and the macro, you really get to see all of it. Families are struggling, individuals are struggling, people really need services. They need to know where to go, because sometimes you know there's help out there, but you just don't know where to start. That's where we come in, to point people in that direction.

If you want to attend a town meeting, you can go and see how policies are made, or if you want to meet with a family on an individual basis and everything in between—even organizing neighborhood events. There are so many different opportunities for an intern in the municipal setting, so we want to see more of them!

AS: My takeaway for any intern or first-year is to throw away the compartmentalizing of micro, mezzo, and macro social work practice. We're doing clinical social work. We're always doing clinical social work. All levels of practice are connected, and this role helps students to see just how!

NB: It is so true, Tony. We try to find rich ways of making these connections for students: looking at policy and its impact on individuals, organizations, and communities, and looking at racial and socioeconomic inequities. This setting brings it all together for our students. Thank you for your dedication to teaching and mentoring

them. Keep up the great work—really.

AS and SG: Thanks again, Nancy. Thank you for speaking with us.