

## A LEGACY TO REMEMBER: SOCIAL WORK AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY

by Audrey E. Johnson  
*Special to the Ink*

The contributions of African-Americans to their self-development and general welfare has been ignored in all areas of American life, including the field of social welfare, and the profession of social work. Recent efforts have focused upon a correction of this oversight, but much more will need to be done before Black self-help and its dual system of social welfare service will be readily recognized, accepted, and appreciated. This neglect encompasses not only White Americans but also Blacks; reflecting the omission of a people from the history of the country.

The one-sided view of social welfare and social work has served to strengthen the perception of African-Americans as dependent, inferior, child-like creatures who were and are today on the receiving end of social welfare and social work services, i.e., that the primary recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children are Black. The truth is that over 50 per cent of such recipients are White. And, social work which expresses concern for the quality of life of people, their environment, and their humanness has not always readily accepted the quality of life for all without regard to race, sex, creed, or color. Black History affords an opportunity to share past developments, and to bring into consciousness the utility of such information for the present and future. We note that beginning in colonial times Blacks took responsibility for their welfare utilizing the court system to redress the unlawful extension of indentured servitude, (1644). Similar petitions to the courts over citizenship rights were initiated by Blacks; continuing even today.

The American social welfare system was influenced by the English Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601; a series of laws over the years which culminated and became known as the 1601 Law. As Blacks were forced from indentured servitude to slavery they were not included in the concepts of responsibility for the care of the poor and needy. This attitude was enhanced by the growth of the slave laws and codes of the colonial period,

and subsequently those of the fledgling United States of America. The free and the slave African-American found it necessary to forge for themselves a means of meeting their social welfare needs on a humane basis; slaves were not considered human, and free Blacks were considered inferior.

To meet their social welfare needs, Blacks, formally and informally, brought together an aggregate group of services to enable them to secure the basics of food, shelter, clothing, or to promote their well being. And, as social workers they devised methods of enabling other Blacks to obtain their needs and to develop their best potential. The slaves used their older people as social service agents (social workers) in caring for the young, maintaining community gardens, looking after the sick, providing a fictive kinship base (extended family) for those in need with the support of the younger slaves. This resulted in a respect and sense of caring for the young and the old, seeking to be protective as far as they were able of their people, basing their eligibility on need alone. While the Church as a social service agency flourished in both the slave and free Black communities, and became a supportive network for the unrecognized

Black family, it put forth social workers in the form of preachers, deacons and elders, and the ladies' auxiliaries. The institutionalization of social welfare organization, which became the formal social work services, in the free Black community was started by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. They organized the Free African Society of Philadelphia, April 12, 1787; the same year that the Constitution of the United States was drafted which counted Blacks as 3/5ths of a person. The Free African

Society operated as a social service agency and more, it had a religious overview, and directed its attention toward the care of widows, orphans, and sought to bury the dead. Moreover, in the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, these same men and their organization provided services to the White population as well; nursing care and burial services.

Other pioneer social workers also sought to promote the well being of

their people and to devise programs and organizations: Prince Hall began the first Black Masonic lodge, 1787, established a school for Black children, and sought legislative action against slavery, and the enslavement of Blacks. Catherine Ferguson, a former slave, opened the first Sunday School, 1793, in New York. Of the 48 children she collected from the almshouses, 20 were White. Those who were born free or who escaped from slavery were ever mindful of the plight of those enslaved for they had first hand knowledge from those like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, to name a few, and the case histories of William Still who helped to run the Philadelphia Anti-slavery Society office.

William Still can be called the first modern day social worker. His is the only account of the Underground Railroad from the view of the people who used it, the fugitive slaves. His book is often cited to provide first hand information about the fugitives. His work in providing social welfare and social work services to African-Americans covered more than 50 years. Still's activities were numerous providing social work services as a caseworker, group worker, community organizer, fund raiser, case manager, record keeper, and concerned citizen for the free Blacks of not only Philadelphia but of the United States.

The above are but a few of the early Blacks who provided the basic foundation for Black social welfare and social work. Given their status by law and custom within the society, African-Americans have not had the luxury of concentrating their energies in only one direction. Coupled with their recognition to be involved with policies and services which would improve their lot, these pioneers

worked individually and collectively to leave a legacy of self-help which has continued today. The Church, Civil Rights Organizations, various clubs, groups for males and females, and social work groups have continued their quest for liberation and justice. They provide social welfare and social work services which cannot always be found in the wider society with dignity and respect. These modern gate keepers pushed for passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which laid the current foundation against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, creed, or color, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act which forbade the same type of discrimination. Over 100 years ago there was passage of the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution prohibiting slavery and providing due process of law, without consideration to race, sex, creed, or color. These past laws and the more recent ones provided legal protection to African-Americans, but they also provided the same protection to Whites, especially women, as well as others who had been previously excluded from the White male dominated privileges of first class citizenship in this country.

In social work there is continuous struggle to recognize the interconnectedness of the similarities of mutual exclusion. Because of the differences based on race, even when Blacks have been at the forefront of pushing for change which benefits not only Blacks but others who have faced discrimination, the racism is so imbedded that there is the desire to deny that other groups benefited, i.e., White women, homophiles, the elderly, etc., from the cited laws. Often personal values supercede professional values. These attitudes call attention to the fact that the contributions of African-Americans to a better life still cry out to be recognized, accepted, and appreciated.

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