

## TO STUDENTS

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As explained further in “Introduction to the Cases,” the cases in this collection came from social workers who told us about their experiences. In considerable detail, the cases depict difficult and challenging situations these social workers actually encountered in professional practice. By both length and complexity, these cases differ from those often published as “vignettes” in social work textbooks. They are more like the situations you will encounter in your field placement or employment or you might hear about in case conferences or peer supervision.

Furthermore, these cases are like the situations you will encounter professionally in another important way: they end at a point where the social worker protagonist must decide how to respond. Traditional social work cases in textbooks often illustrate practice theories or interventions, demonstrating how something should work. In contrast, these cases depict messy, unresolved situations. As a result, they allow you to analyze the situation and decide what to do. Indeed, if you must discuss these cases or write a case analysis for a social work course, they require you to analyze the situation carefully and draw your own conclusion about what needs to be done. Your classmates and instructor may offer

critique and feedback about how well your ideas might actually work in practice. This learning process may be quite different from what you are accustomed to in the classroom. Some students find it challenging, uncomfortable, and even distressing, but it closely approximates the kind of thinking and deciding that will be required of you in professional social work practice and for which you no doubt wish to be well prepared. As a result, these cases will provide opportunities for you to practice and refine important professional skills.

In addition, most of the cases report the experiences of novice social workers (e.g., students, recent graduates, or social workers with only a few years of experience). These social workers confronted situations they found perplexing and disturbing at early points in their career, just as you may in the future. Reflecting upon and discussing these cases can help you to develop professional skill and judgment in the safety of the classroom before you inevitably happen upon similar situations in the field. In short, studying these cases will introduce you to the messy world of professional practice in ways that textbooks and lectures alone cannot.

Beyond graduate education, these cases may also be used for continuing education or for discussion in supervisory sessions. Professional social workers have reported that these cases provide an appropriate level of challenge and vividly portray real-life struggles similar to those that social workers encounter in practice. Even experienced social workers will disagree about how to respond in some instances, as happens frequently in social work practice, but they, too, will benefit from discussing these situations.

Clinical supervisors may wish to use the cases in group supervision, where the benefits of group discussion can challenge and expand supervisees' perspectives, or to expose supervisees to different areas of practice. Supervisors have found them very useful in this regard, especially when a supervisee's practice experience is specialized and the supervisor wishes to enhance learning in other areas of generalist practice.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE CASES

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For more than one hundred years, social work instructors have used cases in the classroom to educate students (Fisher 1978; Reitmeier 2002; e.g., Reynolds 1942 and Towle 1954). Over time, these cases have taken many forms, ranging from brief vignettes only a few sentences or paragraphs long to complex book-length accounts.

Katherine Merseth (1996) identifies three basic educational purposes for using cases: as examples or exemplars to illustrate practice, as foci for reflecting on practice, and as opportunities to practice collaborative decision making. For the first purpose, cases provide concrete and specific examples of how professional theories or interventions apply in practice situations. As examples, cases can help students understand theoretical content and practice skills, what Merseth refers to as *illustrating* practice. During the past few decades, most of the available social work case-

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Adapted with permission from Wolfer, T. A., and V. M. Runnion, 2008. Introduction to the cases. In *Dying, death, and bereavement in social work practice: Decision cases for advanced practice*, 1–12. New York: Columbia University Press.