

<Editor’s Note: Below you will find an exchange of letters between a group of concerned LGBTQ & allied social work educators and NACSW’s Board of Directors related to a workshop entitled, “Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE),” which was presented at NACSW’s Convention 2014 in Annapolis, Maryland on November 8, 2014. It is NACSW’s hope that the dialogue initiated by the exchange of these two letters will open up an on-going dialogue between NACSW and members of the LGBTQ caucus on LGBTQ and related issues.>

Letter #1

June 2015

Re: Letter from concerned LGBTQ and allied social work educators to NACSW

Dear Members of the National Association of Christian Social Workers (NACSW) Board of Directors,

We are writing to you as concerned LGBTQ and allied social work educators regarding the presentation at the NACSW convention last fall by James Phelan and Christopher Doyle titled “Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE).” It is our understanding that this presentation was approved by the board of NACSW. This presentation raises many serious concerns about social work ethics, practice, and education that we note below.

First, it promotes reparative therapy, or “sexual orientation change efforts.” This is in direct opposition to the recent reports of reparative therapy as “potentially harmful” and the cautions about the “danger” of this practice (American Psychological Association, 2015; Blumenfeld & DeVore, 2014; Dehlin et al., 2015; Just The Facts Coalition, 2008). A large study of 1,162 LDS church individuals found reparative therapy to be ineffective or damaging (Dehlin et al., 2015). The American Association of Christian Counselors (2014) eliminated the promotion of reparative therapy in its revised 2014 Code of Ethics. The Obama administration is seeking to ban reparative or conversion therapy (Jarrett, 2015), and it is becoming illegal in states across the nation (Cox, 2013; Fang, 2015).

Further, reparative therapy is unethical for LGBTQ people and especially for LGBTQ youth (APA; Reamer, 2014) and has been conceptualized as conversion bullying (Newman & Fantus, 2015). NASW (2000, 2015) asserts that “conversion and reparative therapies are an infringement to the guiding principles inherent to social worker ethics and values” and seeks to ban the practice (NASW, 2000, 2015).

CSWE, APA, APHA, ACA along with other professional groups have deemed reparative therapy as unethical practice (American Counseling Association, 2013; Dehlin et al., 2015; Just the facts coalition, 2008; Reamer 2014). Reamer (2014, p. 240) states, "A social worker who tells lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender clients that they are sinful, or treats them harshly, would be unethical." Therefore, allowing a forum for this presentation at the NACSW conference violates the social work ethic of evidence-based practice.

Second, its case study conflates LGBTQ identity formation and child sexual abuse, which is not only inaccurate but promotes harmful stereotypes. By far, the most prevalent pattern of child sexual abuse is male perpetration of females, or sexual abuse perpetrated by heterosexuals (Bolen, 2001; Freel, 2003). This disparity holds for adult sexual assault as well (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006).

Third, it cites countries with significant human rights abuses of sexual minority people as potential role models for social workers, which contradicts social work's promotion of human rights (Reichert, 2003).

Fourth, it grossly ignores the societal, familial, and cultural influences that create the struggles that many LGBTQ people face with acceptance of their own identity (Blumenfeld & DeVore, 2014; Dessel, 2011; Herek & McLemore, 2013).

Fifth, it was presented at a professional social work conference, yet while raising the ethical dilemmas Christian social workers' experience between their civic allegiance and spiritual allegiance, it completely leaves out their adherence to social work professional ethics and values. Phelan and Doyle's presentation privileges the concerns of some Christian social workers who hold conservative beliefs regarding LGBTQ over the well-being, safety, and support of LGBTQ people. There are ways to address this tension (Dessel & Bolen, 2014).

We realize the current policy and position of NACSW is *not to take positions* on subjects such as LGBTQ issues or topics (e.g., reparative therapy, religious freedom laws, same-sex marriage). Per your website: "In general, NACSW does not develop position statements on social or political issues about which there is a lack of consensus in the larger Christian community. Neither does NACSW endorse particular political candidates or parties. Rather, NACSW sees as its call to support the efforts of Christians in social work to better understand how their faith contributes to their views and practice as social workers, and to ensure that there is a "safe" place for healthy discussion and at times debate about topics and issues of concern to Christians in social work -- with an understanding that at times people of faith will disagree on such issues. We believe there is definitely a place for advocacy on social and political issues for Christians in social work, and we strongly support and encourage this among our membership. To date, however, we have not seen taking *organizational* positions as our call because to do so would leave out some Christians in social work who might not agree with a specific position NACSW would take on a given issue. NACSW's goal is to be an association in which all Christians in social work feel like they have a place to belong."

However, as a membership organization *comprised of social workers*, not to condemn practices such as conversion therapy is conflictual with our Code of Ethics and tenets of our profession, and to include a presentation that endorses or supports this type of therapy is of serious concern.

We ask that you address the concerns raised in our letter in the following ways:

1. Commit to including consultations with NASW, CSWE, and members of the Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression in any future presentations related to LGBTQ issues.
2. Work with these members and signatories below on developing future NACSW presentations to provide accurate, evidence based, and current research on LGBTQ issues.
3. Provide an open response to this letter on your website that can be shared with your members, our colleagues at other social work membership organizations, and the Caucus of LGBTQ Faculty and Students in Social Work.

We look forward to your response. Please email us at q-caucus-owner@yahogroups.com and adessel@umich.edu.

cc:

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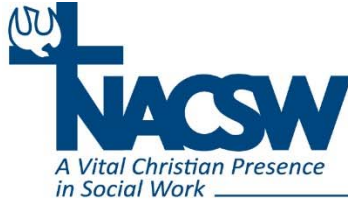
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Letter #2



North American Association of Christians in Social Work

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To: Concerned LGBTQ and Allied Social Work Educators

Re: Response to Your Letter to NACSW's Board of Directors

Date: July 7, 2015

First of all, we would like to thank for taking the time to reach out to NACSW to open up this dialogue with us. The letter you recently sent outlining your concerns about the Phelan/Doyle workshop at NACSW's Convention 2014 in Annapolis, MD was clear, respectfully written, and well documented. We plan to circulate your letter to our membership, which we believe will make an important contribution to current conversations within NACSW on LGBTQ issues.

We also appreciate that your letter includes specific recommendations for building an on-going dialogue between your caucus and our association and for working together to support NACSW's future efforts to provide culturally sensitive workshops on LGBTQ issues. We gladly accept all three of your letter's recommendations, and look forward to exploring with you concrete next steps for putting these into place (see below for additional thoughts regarding your letter's helpful recommendations).

There is one aspect of your letter about which we believe there might be a misunderstanding, and we would like to take this opportunity to speak to this. It appears that your letter is based on the belief that the primary focus of the Phelan/Doyle workshop was on the promotion of the practice of reparative or sexual orientation change therapy. As submitted to NACSW, however, the primary focus of the Phelan/Doyle workshop was framed somewhat differently, informed by the following narrative:

- The two presenters described experiences in their lives when they were younger (they did not know each other at the time) during which they experienced what they described as unwanted same-sex attractions
- Because they felt a dissonance between their religious beliefs and these attractions, they actively sought out help to reduce these attractions
- The presenters reported that through the respective helping processes, they were both able to realize their goal of reducing same-sex attractions in their lives - changes that they report have remained in effect for a number of years for each of them
- The presenters believe that other individuals circumstances similar to their own should, based on their understanding of the principle of self-determination, be able to seek out and receive similar support if they so choose

- The presenters expressed the concern that laws being passed in some states might prevent others from receiving this same type of support even if this is something they want for themselves

NACSW's decision to include the Phelan/Doyle workshop at our conference was not intended to communicate our association's promotion of reparative or sexual orientation change therapy (NACSW does not take positions on such issues, as you rightly indicated in your letter to us). Rather, it was to provide a safe forum for the presenters' voices to be heard, and to generate conversation about the ethical issues this presents for Christians in social work regarding how a social worker should respond to a client who asks a social worker to work with him or her regarding feelings of unwanted same-sex attraction.

We think it is also important to communicate the multiple steps we took to structure this discussion at the conference in such a way as to facilitate the inclusion of a variety of perspectives on this issue:

- a) We recruited two other presenters from NACSW (J. Singletary and H. Harris) to present a workshop which would represent an alternative viewpoint on the perspective presented in the Phelan/Doyle workshop
- b) NACSW's executive director facilitated a telephone conference call with all 4 workshop presenters (Phelan/Doyle/Singletary/Harris) several months prior to the conference to evaluate the issues that would be discussed in these two workshops, and to develop ground rules that would maximize chances that the focus of the presentations would generate healthy, diverse viewpoints, and be focused on client self-determination
- c) NACSW scheduled these two workshops back to back and in same breakout room to increase the chances conference attendees would attend both workshops so that they would hear multiple perspectives
- d) NACSW reserved a meeting room immediately after second workshop and invited all 4 presenters and interested participants to meet to continue discussion on the issues raised during these two workshops. This follow-up meeting was very well attended.

We think it is also important to note as a point of context that going back almost 20 years, this is the only workshop on this particular topic that has appeared on our workshop schedule out of the more than 1,500 workshops we have had at our conferences during that span of time.

As mentioned above, NACSW appreciates and warmly accepts your following three recommendations:

1. *That NACSW engage in consultations with members of your caucus regarding future NACSW sessions on LGBTQ issues:*

NACSW welcomes this opportunity to obtain the kind of consultation and feedback that will help us make informed, sensitive decisions about future conference sessions on LGBTQ issues. Perhaps if we had consulted about this session with members of your caucus prior to the Annapolis conference, we might have together discovered a way to generate a discussion focused on the "self-determination" issue described above, but in such a way as to have avoided some of the offense and misunderstanding that has resulted instead. Perhaps, for example, such a consultation might have yielded a recommendation that we consider an alternative forum such as a panel presentation focused specifically on this self-determination issue with multiple panelists and voices represented.

2. *That NACSW work with members of your caucus to develop/present future NACSW sessions on LGBTQ issues:*

Although it had been submitted and accepted prior to this exchange of letters, there is already a workshop scheduled for NACSW's conference in Grand Rapids in the fall of this year which includes two members of your caucus (A. Dessel and D. Levy) as co-presenters. The title of this workshop is "Conservative Christian Beliefs and Sexual Orientation in Social Work Education." We would welcome additional workshop proposals for our conferences submitted/co-submitted by members of your caucus on a range of LGBTQ issues.

3. *That NACSW present an open response to this letter on our website that can be shared with various groups:*

As mentioned above, we plan to post your letter and this response on NACSW's website, and would invite you to distribute the same to any groups you deem appropriate as conversation partners since we would like to see this dialogue continue moving forward from here.

In conclusion, NACSW appreciates your letter and sees it as an opportunity to both inform our membership about the concerns and issues you raised and to open up a long-overdue dialogue between our association and members of your caucus on LGBTQ and related issues. We look forward to seeing where this conversation leads.

Sincerely,

NACSW Board of Directors