

CARLA D. HOLLOMAN, Social Worker
Public Servant of Children



Photo by Charles T. Goodsell

This second Public Well-Being essay possesses a focus that is wider than a policy area. Its context is a whole public profession, that of social work. Our subject is a senior social worker with much experience in domestic abuse and foster care in particular within an urban environment.

The social work profession in this country is another product of the Progressive Era and in large part the agitation of women. In 1889, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Hull House in Chicago, adopting the settlement house concept first tried in London as a place to aid and educate factory workers. In 1903, Lillian Wald and Florence Kelly discussed the notion of a government bureau devoted to reducing infant mortality. After obtaining the support of Theodore Roosevelt, the U.S. Children's Bureau was eventually established in 1912. Its first director was Julia Lathrop, and for the next half century the organization was almost exclusively headed and staffed by women.

Today, the U.S. social work profession is a fully developed enterprise. It embraces university undergraduate and graduate programs, research journals, accrediting organizations, granting institutions, social policy think tanks, and tens of thousands of state and local departments of social services—all of which is largely a female province of activity.¹

At the same time, social work is not a stabilized or unified field but a diverse and dynamic one. It consists of many occupational categories: social caseworkers, entitlement eligibility workers, clinical therapists, career administrators, college teachers and scholars, public policy analysts, community organizers, and association lobbyists. Each group defines the work a bit differently. A big thematic gulf is between those who help individuals in trouble versus those preoccupied with the state of society. Members of the first group see their job as enabling the severely dispossessed to survive in the short run and reach their ultimate potential in the long run. That is the story told here. Those in the second group are devoted to improving conditions for the poor and ostracized elements of the population by structural social change. While the first group complains about inadequate budgets, the second bemoans oppressive systems.²

Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, first ventured into the public welfare arena in 1919. While women founded the field and do most of its work, this did not keep men from mostly managing it. The first superintendent of public welfare in Mecklenburg was a teacher in a boy's military school, Lucius Ranson. His tasks included monitoring school truancy, forming male recreation opportunities, receiving reports on the insane and destitute, and enforcing moral standards at movie theaters.

Eventually, the superintendent's office turned into what is known today as the Department of Social Services (DSS). From 1945 to 1972, the unit was led by Wallace Kuralt, a social work administrator who got his start in New Deal relief agencies. To illustrate the shift in professional norms during Kuralt's tenure, the agency's approach to human reproduction evolved from (1) mandatory sterilization to (2) condom distribution to (3) promotion of "the pill."

From 1994 to 2007, the department was led by Richard “Jake” Jacobsen. He did much to modernize it for contemporary needs. He established the state’s first welfare-to-work program (he called it “Work First”), created a computerized information case management program that allows instant posting of client reports (“IZZY”), and nurtured a culture of treating clients as “customers” who deserve quick and courteous service.³

Mecklenburg County includes the city of Charlotte plus six small towns. The resulting catchment area of 500 square miles and a million people make this DSS the state’s most important urban public welfare institution. At last word, the Department’s workforce numbered approximately 1,200 personnel, of which 87 percent were female and 62 percent African American. They work in several buildings, the most important being the Kuralt Center, the agency’s headquarters. The DSS operating budget is in the neighborhood of \$200 million, of which about 40 percent comes from the county, 14 percent from the state, and 44 percent from Washington. This does not include approximately \$1 billion in fiduciary funds that flow through the agency on their way to recipients in the form of cash assistance, SNAP credits (Food Stamps), Medicaid benefits, and other transfers.

The Department’s director is appointed by the County Board of Commissioners and administratively she reports to the county manager. Line programs are organized in three divisions: Economic Services, which manages Work First, SNAP, Medicaid, and WIC; Adult Services, which handles investigation of elder abuse, operation of senior nutrition sites, and transportation of the elderly and disabled; and Youth and Family Services, which investigates child, family, and sexual abuse, and arranges for foster care and adoption. This last division is where our subject is employed.

Carla D. Holloman was born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and was raised in low-income housing by a single mother who worked at least two jobs at a time. Carla’s father was absent from the household. Upon graduating from high school, she left home to attend college, the first one in her family to do so. In 2001, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University in Greensboro granted her a BA degree with a major in psychology.

A year after graduation, Carla gave birth to a baby boy, whom she named David. Six weeks following David’s birth, she married his father and moved with him to his hometown of Atlanta. To help make ends meet in the big city, she obtained a job in a private foster care agency, exposing her for the first time to social work. Although Carla found herself attracted to helping children, the work was unsatisfying and the pay low. Unfortunately, the marriage did not work out and ended in divorce.

At this juncture in her life, Carla felt she had reached a crossroads. A bold step was needed to reset her life journey. Yet the prospects for doing so were not bright. She was 25 years old, newly divorced, a single parent, and had no salaried job or prospects of getting one. With trepidation yet determination, Ms. Holloman decided to aim for a career in professional social work and obtain the educational background necessary to do so. A scholarship for graduate work in the field came to

her attention, for which she applied. A Child Welfare Education Collaborative grant was awarded that Carla used to enter a Master of Social Work (MSW) program sponsored jointly by her alma mater A&T and the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, where she enrolled. Looking back, Carla will never forget the day she set out to return to her native state for this new start—armed, as she recalls, “with \$700 and a prayer.”

For the next two years in graduate school, Carla carried a full load of courses while holding three part-time jobs to supplement her stipend. One of these positions was at the Alamance County Department of Social Services in Burlington, North Carolina, 20 miles from campus. Her position there was that of child protective services investigator; this led to 17 months of being on duty on an as-needed basis as an innocent newcomer to the dangerous business of entering homes to check on abuse and neglect complaints.

Upon graduating with the MSW in 2007, Ms. Holloman assumed her first full-time social work job right there in Greensboro, at the Guilford County Department of Social Services. Her position in the agency was again that of child protective services investigator. In addition to family abuse cases, she investigated allegations of irregularity at daycare centers and group homes, bringing the young social worker in touch again with the private-sector side of her field as experienced in Atlanta.

After nearly four years at Guilford, Carla was delighted to obtain a position in the state’s largest DSS department in Mecklenburg County. She moved with little David to the City of Charlotte in January 2011. In light of her background, Carla was assigned to Mecklenburg’s Division of Youth and Family Services, where she has remained since.

At this writing, Ms. Holloman holds the rank of senior social worker. Her job title is that of permanency planning social worker, a phrase that refers to the task of working out care scenarios for children who have, for their own safety, been removed by the department from the custody of their biological parents or formal caregivers. The options available in these scenarios are (1) enrollment in rehabilitative social services for parents followed by reunification with the family if possible, by far the preferred outcome; (2) temporary placement with foster parents while a determination is made as to whether reunification is possible; and (3) permanent adoption by a guardian or new family when no alternative course of action is available.

Within the division, Carla is a member of a five-person team dedicated to permanency planning. As such, she and her teammates are responsible for casework decisions during the fluid and critical period spanning options (1) and (2) above. Her team leader is Mr. David Fee, a DSS veteran with long experience in this area. Director of the Youth and Family division is Mr. Charles Bradley, who in turn reports to the Department’s director, Ms. Peggy Eagan.

Over the course of the many job experiences just outlined, Carla underwent several inner transformations that shaped how she carries out her job today as a social worker in the Charlotte metro area. Each change moment has added to a

growing accumulation of personal insights that she presently carries with her as she encounters the challenges of this demanding profession.

A realization achieved early on at Guilford is to watch out for one's own health and well-being. In a job in which one is simultaneously responsible for trying to make better the life of multiple desperate individuals, there is always the temptation to do more on a given day. After misjudging a few times the attention and energy she was devoting to clients versus to herself and David, Carla realized that to perform her job well a proper balance must be maintained between job and personal life.

Another epiphany-type moment occurred when one evening she and her boyfriend dropped in for kicks at a local "gentlemen's club." To Carla's astonishment, one of the dancers performing was a young woman who had been a sexually abused girl she had previously mentored and monitored in a group setting. As the shock sank in, Carla realized fully for the first time how important it is for young women to develop a healthy and constructive self-image. The task is especially difficult for workers in the sex industry who, in the vast majority of cases, live subconsciously as "wounded little girls" seeking male approval. This incident has remained in her mind since as she counsels girls.

Another insight was acquired when Carla self-examined her own parenting skills and attitudes. In elementary school, her son David acted out excessively to the extent of becoming a disturbance in the classroom. When his teachers introduced to Carla the possibility that he was suffering from ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), Carla loudly refused to accept this explanation and instead attributed it to a high level of intelligence combined with boredom in the classroom. As time went on, however, she relaxed her defensiveness, acknowledged the teachers were probably right, and agreed to initiating professional help. What this experience taught was that when welfare parents—beset anyway by myriad sources of stress—rant and rave over their children's conduct, she could truly appreciate their state of mind. Ever since, she has been able to defuse the frustration felt by clients over their kids' behavior by joking about and sharing her own experience in this regard.

A fourth self-discovery occurred for Carla when she witnessed instances where children under agency care met violent death. She discovered far deeper than at a mere intellectual level that social work is not only about human uplift but also about human tragedy. One time she had to attend the funeral of an abused boy so as to have an opportunity to question his mother about endangering her surviving children. In another case, a 12-year-old girl she was working with hanged herself without warning. Once when the agency did not act quickly enough to remove a 6-year-old little girl from the home of an abusive family, she was later found beaten and starved to death. This last incident caused the entire department to pause and reflect on its duty.

A final inner transformation occurred during an episode of personal depression that set in soon after Ms. Holloman's arrival in Mecklenburg. Despite getting this good job with a promising future in a prestigious agency, she felt deep down

something was missing. Gradually, she saw herself entering “a dark place” in which she was not relating well to others and could not figure out what was wrong. She talked to her beloved grandmother about it and was told to “give birth to your pain,” and when it is outside of you, “give it a name.”

This piece of wisdom gave Carla the key to unlocking her dark place. When the “it” pain was named, it turned out to be bottled-up hostile feelings associated with family relationships experienced in her childhood. Uncovering this hidden hurt was aided by reading a book that advises adults to reconnect with their early roots.⁴ In due course, Carla began to discuss openly with family members what she was going through, and gradually, the depression lifted as she brought to the surface what had been bothering her. The resulting sense of liberation again enabled Carla to relate personally to troubled clients and help them understand themselves.

At this point in the essay we turn to the program content of Ms. Holloman’s work. As we have seen, her career has centered on two interconnected social work functions: child protection investigation and foster care planning. Speaking of the first, in Mecklenburg County calls alleging abuse or neglect of children and adults are received in a specially equipped room in what is known as the department’s Charlotte East Building. It is staffed by trained intake personnel on a 24/365 basis with one crew scheduled for day duty and another for night. Calls come in on a dedicated abuse hotline number, 704-336-CARE. The calls typically originate from family members, relatives, neighbors, police officers, hospital staff, or school personnel. The nature and circumstance of the activity are noted by the operator, and an intake supervisor determines whether the indicated behavior legally constitutes abuse.⁵ If so, and if violent harm or serious neglect has occurred or is likely to happen soon, an investigator is assigned the case who immediately jumps in a county car and departs for the site. Not all reports describe an imminent emergency, and these are followed up later. In a typical year, 500 to 800 adult abuse calls are received by the agency and as many as 12,000 for child abuse; some 2,000 open cases are continuously pending.⁶

As we have seen, Ms. Holloman investigated child abuse or neglect cases in Alamance and Guilford Counties. In so doing, she developed a series of prudent steps she regularly took before proceeding. She would always inform an associate in the office where she was going and when she expected to return. If information is known about weapons in the house or of a parent with a violent criminal record, the police are either asked to be on alert or parked at the address. Then, after knocking on the door and entering the dwelling, Carla had the habit of standing near the open portal until conditions were established as safe. Her practice with respect to opening conversations was not to act as someone in authority looking for guilty parties, but as a caring professional who has come to gather information. She would then attempt to interview every person present in the house, including children and relatives.

Throughout the visit, the prime objective is to be assured of the child’s or adult’s current safety. A secondary aim is to discuss with the parents or other caregivers the

services that are available to stabilize the situation, such as keeping a responsible relative always present, undergoing detoxification, or entering a counseling program. Since domestic abusers commonly manipulate others and act impulsively, Carla always kept alert to sudden acts of rage. She learned of this harsh reality one day early in her career when an angry father suddenly threatened to hit her. Her supervisor stepped between them and ordered him to back off or expect police arrest, which he did. The quick action became a model to remember for the young investigator.

Ms. Holloman points out that childhood sexual abuse specifically has cursed the lives of approximately one out of three women and one out of five men. Investigating this horrendous crime requires sensitivity and special skills. Almost always the scars are not physical but psychological and hence hidden from view.

Detecting these in children is an especially delicate matter. One device she often used was to gauge the content of the child's sex vocabulary. If a boy does not know the word *penis* or the girl *vagina* but only euphemistic nicknames, this practice may have been encouraged by a pedophile. If these verbal substitutes are then used to describe sexual activities not normally known about at that child's age level, the evidence is strong that something is wrong.

If the responsible social worker, department superiors, and the division attorney agree that it necessary to remove a child from a home, a court order is normally required. In hearing the case, the judge makes certain that all alternative solutions have been pursued to no avail and removal remains the only option. If an emergency is sensed that no time is available for a court hearing, the agency is permitted to exercise on its own up to 12 hours of mandatory custody. The act of removing a child from his or her parents is multilayered and emotional for all involved; even though doing so may not produce the Hollywood dramatics one might expect, the day on which it happens is forever etched in the minds of all persons involved.

Once custody is obtained, within 30 to 45 days the department must prepare for and secure court approval for a plan to care for the child. This is where the permanency planning activity in which Ms. Holloman is currently engaged comes into play. If possible, the plan will aim to return the child to his or her parents after a prescribed regime of social services and/or therapeutic rehabilitation. During this period the boy or girl is placed in the care of a guardian or foster family. At a later time, court approval for experimental parental recontact may be attempted. This may be done by temporary home visits with a relative present or ones arranged outside the home, such as supervised DSS play rooms for infants and toddlers.

If all these corrective steps fail, the only way out short of indefinite foster care (very seldom used) is adoption, by either a recruited family or guardian. Such a step is considered sufficiently serious that it requires a formal trial in domestic court. With all parties present with their attorneys, the caseworker and other involved parties testify with respect to the circumstances and evidence brought forward by the state in support of a permanent termination and transfer of parental rights.

It is the task of arranging and monitoring of foster care that occupies most of the work time of Carla and her permanency planning teammates. A preliminary

matter of vital importance is to recruit suitable foster parents and match them well with individual foster children. Problems to look out for are parental candidates that seem too motivated by the amount of monetary care payments provided and those who believe the answer to all interpersonal domestic disagreements is solemn prayer absent all professional intervention. A number of other factors must be considered as well, such as the relative ages of the foster child and adults and how much medical care or daily supervision is necessary. Often, persons who have themselves grown up in foster family care are ideal.

At this writing, Carla's foster caseload is thirteen boys and girls. She calls them "her babies" and loves to joke with them, be cheerful and upbeat, and talk to them about life's obstacles, while at the same time inspiring hope. She visits each one individually and regularly in the foster home setting in order to check household conditions and inquire how things are going. On other occasions, she may arrange meetings with the child alone at school or elsewhere in the community.

Each case is unique. The child-family match may work out well and the foster experience may be very positive. Or it may generate chronic and bitter conflict that requires termination of the arrangement and an alternative placement. A common reason for the latter is when lingering loyalty persists on the part of the girl or boy to biological parents. Indeed, the best outcome possible in any foster situation is reuniting the child with her or his original family. To maximize chances for such a conclusion, Carla considers an integral part of her job to be monitoring the progress of each case carefully. This includes attempting to understand the history and dynamics of the dysfunctional family involved and how to break through its cycle of destructive relationships. In some instances, she is able to achieve her goal within a few months, while in others the process of rehabilitation and encouragement goes on for years or fails outright. Her most rewarding moment is when one of her "babies" safely returns home and stays there.

Looking at Ms. Holloman's career as a totality, we can see that its dominant theme is the care of troubled children. Back when preparing for her "\$700 and a prayer" leap, she had already worked with youngsters in a private agency but had not yet set her mind in that direction. However, the scholarship that enabled her to take the leap specifically dealt with this occupational decision, and the fit turned out to be perfect. In the succeeding years of her career in government—in three county departments of social services—her principal area of activity was child protection.

In the process of doing this very important work, Ms. Holloman herself grew as a person and as a professional. She states openly that she loves social work and wants to remain in Mecklenburg County for the rest of her career. Moreover, she hopes eventually to advance to positions of leadership in the organization that would enable her to amplify the effects of what she has acquired by transferring her skills and insights to the next generation of child welfare workers. Nothing would satisfy her more than to promote the kind of social work she would have wanted but did not get for her family back in Chapel Hill when she was young. Her calling springs from deep within.

NOTES

1. Arthur E. Fink, Jane H. Pfouts, and Andrew W. Dobelstein, *The Field of Social Work* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), Ch. 1. See also Frederic G. Reamer, ed., *The Foundations of Social Work Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), Ch. 1 and Ch. 2. Interestingly enough, even the first recorded victim of child abuse was female. In 1874, a girl named Mary Ellen needed protection, but the only laws available to shield her had to do with the abuse of animals, a point that spurred new legislation.
2. Lena Dominelli, *Social Work: Theory and Practice for a Changing Profession* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004).
3. Goodsell, *Mission Mystique: Belief Systems in Public Agencies* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011), 141–146. When in his New Deal days, Kuralt drove around North Carolina to inspect welfare offices, and he often took his son Charles with him. This offspring became the Charles Kuralt that originated the “On the Road” segment still seen on the *CBS Evening News*.
4. Monica McGoldrick, *You Can Go Home Again: Reconnecting with Your Family* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).
5. Legal definitions vary by state. In federal law, child abuse and neglect is defined as “physical or mental injury, sexual abuse or exploitation, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child by a person who is responsible for the child’s welfare, under circumstances which indicate that the child’s health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby.” Susan J. Wells, “Child Abuse and Neglect Overview,” *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, 19th ed. (Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers, 1995), 346–353 at 347. A feature of North Carolina abuse law is that anyone over the age of 18 is mandated to report suspected instances of abuse or neglect.
6. Goodsell, *Mission Mystique*, 150, 152.

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