

# Using Your Social Work Skills to Serve Your Community

By Teresa Kelly, MSW

I was always interested in government and how it could be used to help people. From an early age, with the help of a Catholic education, I was constantly looking out for the needs of others around my community.

Many years ago, my first taste of community involvement was seeking out recreation facilities in my part of Buena Vista Township. It turned out there were none.

I attended Atlantic Community College, where I was majoring in recreation therapy. I conducted a survey of needs for recreational opportunities in my community and presented it to the Buena Vista Township Committee (Town Council). At that time, the Township Committee did not wish to do anything about the situation. Later on, I was given the opportunity to be appointed to the Buena Vista Township Recreation Committee. I served on this committee for 7 years and it still seemed to me like not enough progress was being made during that time.

After completing community college, I continued my education at Stockton State College and majored in Social Work. I worked full time at a mental health center and Ancora State Psychiatric Hospital. I then began working on obtaining my master's degree in social work (MSW) from Rutgers University. In 1990,

the opportunity came along for me to run for election for a seat on the Buena Vista Township Committee. I was hesitant at first, but took the chance and became the first woman ever elected to the Buena Vista Township Committee in 1991.

Over the years much progress has been made, using my social work skills and values to work with others for the common good. The experience has been very rewarding. Working at the local level of government seems to be the most difficult. The public comes to local government officials and staff with problems that are at all levels of government: county, state, and federal. We are the front line of defense for our citizens and taxpayers. Since services and resources are being reduced and the economy has faltered, times are now more difficult for people than ever – and trust me, we hear about it from our constituents.

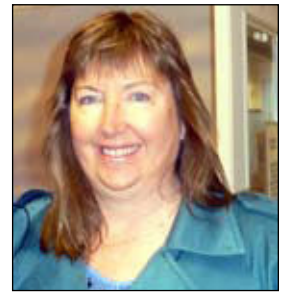
Social workers already have the training to advocate for their communities, either locally or with the other levels of government. Social workers are good listeners, communicators, and natural problem-solvers, and the public appreciates that.

To get involved in your community at the political and legislative level, start with something that interests you. The town or

county you live in has plenty of committees and various other opportunities to serve. Attend a meeting and then go from there! Involvement can take as much time as you can spare. Definitely start as a volunteer. If (or when!) you are ready to take the next step to elected office, it will require more commitment. I believe social workers are the ideal candidates!

If you want improvements in government, then you must get involved. If all of the good people choose not to serve in government, or do not stay involved in their community, who will be left to fill those slots? It is easy to criticize government, but what actions can you take to improve its success?

*Teresa Kelly is Deputy Mayor of Buena Vista Township in Atlantic County, NJ. She has been in office for 19 years and serves on many sub-committees. Teresa is a social worker with an MSW from Rutgers University. Buena Vista Township is a rural community in the Pinelands with a population of about 8,000 people and an area that covers 42.5 square miles.*



## For Domestic Violence Victims, a Little Financial Literacy Goes a Long Way

*Preliminary results show money management course increased victims' self-sufficiency and competence*

An exploratory study by Judy L. Postmus, assistant professor and director of the Center on Violence Against Women and Children in the Rutgers University School of Social Work, finds that victims of economic abuse are better able to address their financial needs after going through a curriculum on money management.

The study, funded by The Allstate Foundation, surveyed 121 domestic abuse victims in 10 states in 2008 and 2009. The underlying assumption, according to Postmus, is that women who are seeking help for the abuse they experienced may not think of the control of finances by their abusers as abuse at all.

Postmus and her colleague Sara Plummer, an instructor in the School of Social Work, examined the impact of a curriculum, *Moving Forward Through Money Management*, created by The

Allstate Foundation's Economics Against Abuse Program. They interviewed 121 domestic abuse survivors at 15 sites in 10 states. They asked participants about their histories of abuse, probed their economic literacy, and their state of economic self-sufficiency. The researchers also asked questions about the specific financial skills the participants had learned and used over time.

More than 90 percent of the participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the curriculum, and more than half reported they used the curriculum often or very often. But perhaps the most significant finding of the study was that after learning the curriculum, 88 percent of the participants had set financial goals for themselves.

Additionally, more than three quarters had created a budget, over two thirds reported they had begun paying off debts or looked up their credit history,

and 22 percent started a retirement account.

This "exploratory" study provided an opportunity to perfect methods for a larger, more complete study, which Postmus and Plummer are about to begin with a new grant from The Allstate Foundation. In this next study, they will interview survivors who learn the curriculum as well as two other groups who are not exposed to the curriculum – survivors receiving services from domestic violence programs and survivors who are not involved with such services.

The object will be not only to show the impact of the financial literacy program on the lives of those experiencing abuse, but the extent to which survivors experience economic abuse. This study will take place in the Northeast, Midwest, and the South.