



# FINANCIAL SOCIAL WORK

By Ronald Hube

Patricia Fanning contributed to this article

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Adjunct professor and alumnus Jeffrey Clark, MA, MSW '12, is a financial coach at MakingChange, an organization in Columbia that provides financial education and support services for people with low incomes. The work often cuts directly to the heart of many of the problems that social workers address every day, yet it's an area of practice that social work has only recently begun to identify and develop.

“For many of us, we don't feel confident with money or numbers,” Clark says. “We go into social work as a soft-science field and relegate hard financial considerations to other professionals.”

But the School of Social Work is helping to change that mindset through its Financial Social Work Initiative (FSWI). Formally established five years ago, the FSWI is an intensely active program that provides academic training, field-placement experience, research, continuing education, and educational community events. Through its work, FSWI is also building and supporting a professional network in the financial social work field.

While other social work schools have centers and programs that deal with asset building, the University of Maryland—the first University to teach a graduate-level course in financial social work—is unique in dedicating an entire initiative to the field, says Jodi Jacobson-Frey, PhD, LCSW-C, associate professor and chair of the FSWI steering committee.

“As far as I know, there are no other programs like ours at other colleges and universities in the U.S.,” she says.

FSWI is also unique in that it not only draws participation from throughout the School of Social Work, it is also open to faculty and students throughout the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB). Attracting more participation from all UMB schools is “one of our short-term goals,” Jacobson-Frey says.





Faculty, students, and others involved in FSWI say the program has been successful both at preparing future social workers to address clients' financial situations and at providing help to people who need it right now.

School of Social Work field instructor and alumna Robin McKinney, MSW '01, who co-founded the FSWI with fellow alumna Meg Woodside, MSW '07, MBA, says the initiative has raised the profile of financial issues in social work.

"Many continuing education and elective course participants have noted that they had never received training on financial issues, despite witnessing many financial challenges firsthand," McKinney says.

The FSWI's academic offerings include Financial Stability for Clients, a three-credit MSW elective course developed by School of Social Work alumni. Designed for social work that is performed for all populations and in all settings, the course introduces the theoretical frameworks, tools, and interventions regarding financial capability. The course also helps students better understand their own financial values and beliefs.

"We are currently updating the course and plan to offer it to students as a permanent elective in the near future," says Jacobson-Frey. "Additionally, our continuing professional education courses continue to fill with social workers from diverse practice settings, and we are offering more and more specialized courses on financial issues related to social work practice for different client populations."

### WORK ON THE GROUND

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FSWI students have performed financial casework services for



Financial Social Work Initiative Leaders: (l to r) alums Meg Woodside, Robin McKinney, along with alum and Associate Professor Jodi Jacobson Frey.

seniors, conducted an awareness campaign and developed outreach strategies for home improvement loan programs, and helped with foreclosure prevention efforts. Discussion is under way with Benjamin Franklin High School in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Baltimore regarding help from FSWI students with the school's efforts to work with families on financial issues and to prevent evictions.

McKinney, director of the Maryland CASH (Creating Assets, Savings, and Hope) Campaign says that last year student intern Amy Johnson co-coordinated a promotional effort to encourage low-income tax filers to buy savings bonds with their refunds. Bonds totaling nearly \$50,000 were purchased as a result.

"Providing financial resources, information, and access to low-cost, appropriate financial products are critical to addressing many of the foundational issues related to poverty," McKinney says. In a nontraditional FSWI field placement made through the School of Social Work's Social Work Community Outreach Service (SWCOS), master's degree students delivered a four-session curriculum—the Financial Literacy Volunteer Initiative—for Baltimore middle school students. The

program's one-hour sessions, which included games and role-playing scenarios, were How Do You Get Money?, Where Does Money Go?, How Does Money Grow?, and The Cost of Cool. Alumna Pamela Parnell, MSW '11, who developed the program, says it was "an incredible opportunity to empower students, community members, teachers, and ourselves with financial literacy concepts." "Asset building," adds Dick Cook, MSW, director of SWCOS, "is an important approach in the poverty-fighting tool kit."

During her first year as a social work student, Devon Hyde, MSW '12, had a field placement at the Montgomery County Community Action Agency, which offered the Internal Revenue Service Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program.

"I saw taxes as a great 'teachable moment' to begin a conversation with clients about finances," Hyde says. "Often we could get them to stop back in or schedule an appointment to talk with us about other resources, like access to public benefits or help with a résumé or information on work force services."

The next year, Hyde was a research assistant for Jacobson-Frey on an evaluation project of the Financial Stability Pathway Project, a Maryland CASH Campaign

program that connects low- and moderate-income families with service providers. Other FSWI research has included a case study of a domestic violence organization's ability to address economic justice for victims of violence committed by their partners.

Christine Callahan, PhD, LCSW-C, who joined the FSWI as a social worker and researcher last year, says her work includes research design and data analysis regarding "financially underserved populations." The research addresses areas including financial capability and literacy, and institutional barriers faced by low- and moderate-income households.

"What are the needs of different populations and communities—people in need who we are working with?" Callahan says.

The School of Social Work recently received two grants supporting research on financial social work efforts. Funding from Junior Achievement of Maryland is backing a feasibility study, led by Jacobson-Frey and Callahan, of new ideas for developing college savings programs in Baltimore middle schools. The Maryland CASH Campaign is collaborating with the School and Junior Achievement on the study. And the Maryland CASH Campaign is funding completion of the evaluation—led by Jacobson-Frey and Karen Hopkins, PhD, MSW, associate professor at the School—of the campaign's Financial Stability Pathway Project.

### PUBLIC EVENTS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Events conducted by the FSWI include Social Workers Help You Save, a recent collaboration at Mondawmin Mall with the Baltimore CASH Campaign. The event promoted free tax preparation and information on savings bonds and financial services. On campus, the FSWI has organized panel discussions and collaborated with the University's Wellness and Academic-Life

Balance Program to encourage financial stability among students. Programs for students regarding credit management have been conducted at the Health Sciences and Human Services Library on a regular basis.

Supporting legislation that would boost the financial health of people in need is also a key element of the initiative's work, says Jacobson-Frey. Students have advocated for Maryland to limit employers' ability to check job applicants' credit reports, and to require that employees be told if they might be eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit—a federal tax benefit available for low- to moderate-income workers. FSWI members have also backed bills that would prevent landlords from discriminating based on applicants' sources of income, allow state employment applicants to not initially disclose criminal convictions, and enhance state programs regarding health care, rental, and energy assistance. And FSWI representatives have served as members of a Maryland General Assembly task force on improving financial education, and on the state's Financial Education and Capability Commission.

"Social workers have an important role to play in public policy that goes beyond direct lobbying for a specific bill," says McKinney. "Social workers should actively communicate the financial aspirations and barriers to financial security directly from clients and communities to other nonprofits, state agencies, advocates, policymakers, and the media."

### A SUCCESS STORY

Hyde, who represents the Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Maryland and Delaware on the FSWI steering committee, which sets the initiative's goals, says the FSWI has "a green thumb for financial capability work."

"We hope to bring knowledge and skills to social workers so they can build the economic stability of individuals and families

in their daily practice, be it with domestic violence victims, military personnel, or work with older adults," she says.

Clark, a member of the FSWI's community partners subcommittee, says the initiative "is certainly achieving the goal of raising awareness of the importance of personal and community finance in all the realms of social work practice.

"We're providing practitioners with the tools necessary for integrating financial social work into their work through continuing education programs, and connecting with students so they begin considering ways that financial social work can be implemented in their field placements and work after school." Jacobson-Frey says the development of financial social work is long overdue.

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for so long, social work was not addressing the full scope of social problems," Jacobson-Frey says. "Financial capability involves financial education, access to resources, and a belief that people and communities can change. This is central to social work and part of a code of ethics as well as recently updated educational competencies that focus on economic and social justice and equality, including financial. By better preparing social workers to address and help resolve financial problems with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities, we are better serving our clients



Robin McKinney instructs a class at the School of Social Work.

and improving quality of life for the future."

According to McKinney, "Financial social work also seeks to remedy the mental and social impact of financial stress on individuals, families, and communities. Financial social work recognizes the underlying values, beliefs, and barriers that complicate financial decision-making. These supports coupled

### A HISTORY AND FUTURE OF COLLABORATION

The origins of the FSWI date back to 2004, when Baltimore-area community groups and faculty and alumni from the School of Social Work began talking about the impact of the economic crisis on social work clients. Social workers recognized that they needed greater knowledge and skills in helping clients deal with financial issues, and through a collaboration among the University, community organizations, and alumni, the FSWI was launched in 2008 with the full support of Richard P. Barth, PhD, MSW, dean of the School of Social Work.

The concept of financial social work had been developed shortly before, when the introspective behavioral model Femonomics (the Gender of Money), created by social worker Reeta Wolfsohn, CMSW, broadened into a discipline that is not gender specific. Wolfsohn, the founder of the Center for Financial Social Work, taught a social work continuing education training session on her behavioral model at the University of Maryland in 2008.

"Bringing Reeta to campus generated immense interest from students, the dean, and the community", says Woodside. "Robin and I saw a tremendous unmet need for integrating both clinical and macro financial capability skills in the field of social work, and we wanted our School to play a leadership role in developing and disseminating this expertise."

— Hyde

with access to sufficient savings can assist clients through disruptions in income, a vehicle repair, medical crises, or other financial emergencies." Clark says that while "financial resources and adequate financial planning can play a significant role" in addressing social problems, he adds that "what is also needed is a positive mental attitude, a willingness to make changes in behavior, and the ability to find or create a supportive environment in which to achieve one's goals"—areas in which social workers have traditionally provided help.



Since the FSWI's inception, the list of organizations and institutions that have worked with or invested in the initiative—or have benefited directly from its fieldwork and research—has become a long one that includes a wide variety of names such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore City Public Schools, the United Way, Take Charge America (a nonprofit credit counseling group), Eastern Washington University, Operation HOPE, and the Citi Foundation.

“Community partners” represented on the FSWI steering committee include the Woodside Foundation and McDaniel College in Westminster. “University partners”—collaborators outside of the School of Social Work—include Patricia Fanning, media relations specialist in the Office of Communications and Public Affairs, and Tisa Silver-Canady, MBA, assistant director of the Office of Financial Education and Wellness.

The FSWI's Scholar Network and LinkedIn website, each available on the School of Social Work's website, and the initiative's Financial Capability and Asset Building Social Work Consortium, have helped bring together researchers, educators, and social workers to address financial social work issues, says Jacobson-Frey. About 15 schools of social work so far have been represented during meetings and conference calls conducted by the consortium, which is led by Jacobson-Frey and Callahan.

“We plan to have quarterly calls/meetings and expand to include an annual community partners meeting that will provide an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to share ideas about research, education, and practice related to financial social work,” says Jacobson-Frey. “The consortium provides a much-needed link for social work educators and researchers, who are often working in silos within their schools, to discuss their work, develop ideas to move the



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According to a brief written by Jacobson-Frey and Rebecca Sander, PhD, Deborah Svoboda, PhD, MSW, and Audrey Elkinson, MSW—each from the School of Social Work—the FSWI is expanding its membership and community partnerships while seeking more grant funding in order to grow its educational and research work—all the while strengthening the “acceptance of social workers in this emerging practice area” of financial social work. The brief was for the workshop Exploring the Intersection Between Financial

Capability and Domestic Violence, which was held in Washington, D.C.,

“Defining and solidifying the potential for social workers to advance economic stability and capability for individuals and communities will require ongoing conversations and collaboration among numerous educational, community, and government institutions,” according to the brief. “The [School of Social Work] believes social workers have an obligation to understand barriers to clients’ economic stability and to competently intervene.”

School of Social Work alumna Sara Johnson, MSW ’02, director of the Baltimore CASH Campaign, is

an early supporter of the FSWI and says the program has been very successful. “It’s great to see the School invest in this initiative and take ownership of it,” she says—and she wants financial social work to continue to develop at the School.

“I hope that more classes are developed and offered, and I hope that more of these concepts are integrated into other course work,” says Johnson, who develops and teaches FSWI continuing education programs and is a member of the initiative’s steering committee. “And I hope there is a growing body of research from the University of Maryland around this work in the field.”

Clark agrees:

“I hope that more professors and students begin to appreciate the value of financial social work and find ways to introduce it into their classes and field placements.”

**Learn more about the School's Financial Social Work Initiative at [www.ssw.umaryland.edu/fsw](http://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/fsw).**