

SWPI symposium focuses on racial equity



By Rena Malai, News staff

NASW's Social Work Policy Institute convened a two-day national think tank called "Achieving Racial Equity: Calling the Social Work Profession to Action" at the NASW national office in November.

Sixty social work leaders, administrators and educators, as well as policymakers and racial-equity experts came together to discuss and examine the issue of racial equity.

This is the first time NASW has held a think tank about what it takes to achieve racial equity, said Sandra Bernabei, president-elect of NASW's New York City Chapter. Bernabei and former Chapter President Mary Pender Greene served on the planning committee for the think tank.

The symposium built on NASW's work on cultural competency and helped put its tool kit, "Institutional Racism & the Social Work Profession" (naswdc.org/diversity), into action.

"The symposium is a beginning for social workers to understand the issue and work to undo it," Bernabei said. "When social workers have a clear and common understanding of structural racism, what it is and how it is maintained, then we become inspired and mobilized to engage in the work of 'undoing' racism."

NASW President Jeane Anastas and NASW CEO Angelo McClain attended the think tank and spoke about the importance of putting plans in motion that could make total racial equity a reality.

"This is a great coming together of leaders in the social work profession who are committed to undoing racism and achieving racial equity," McClain said. "This is an opportunity for all of us to learn and to consider how we must continue to be aware and all take responsibility to address structural racism."

Pender Greene said it is important to recognize that race and race matters are daily issues for both social work clients and staff of color. She said since most social workers were trained to practice in a colorblind manner, there are large pieces of the lives of clients of color that don't get addressed. This leaves the client void of a place to talk about subtle and not so subtle indignities that are a part of their everyday lives.

"A major difficulty is that many white social workers view racism as individual, intentional acts of meanness and experience, and any discussion of racism in an institution is seen as a personal affront," she said. "It is the role of the social worker, not the client, to learn the skills and bring issues of race and racism to our work."

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, chairman of the sociology department at Duke University, kicked off the symposium with a presentation on “Racism, New Racism & Colorblind Racism in ‘Post-racial’ America,” which was followed by a mini “Undoing Racism” workshop by The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond.

The second day focused on gleaned principles from current efforts in communities striving to address racial equity. Social work leader Joyce James, of Texas, moderated the panel, which included Ralph Bayard, of Casey Family Programs, which also helped sponsor the symposium; Diane Bell-McCoy, of Associated Black Charities of Maryland; Erlene Archille, of the city of Boston’s Public Health Department; and Mary Flowers, of Seattle.

“Examining the Developmental Stages in Achieving Racial Equity,” a panel representing efforts related to curricula and research undertaken in social work education programs, included Laura Lein, with the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work; Ruby Gourdine, Howard University School of Social Work professor; and Joshua Miller, Smith College School for Social Work associate dean and professor.

Bernabei said the think tank brought together collective wisdom around the issue of racial equity.

“Achieving racial equity is a social justice issue,” she said. “Social workers are planted in every institution, in every social system, and they are perfectly placed nationally. Once social workers have clarity, once we know how to do this, we’ll take leadership in driving this forward.”

The symposium planning group also included racial equity consultants Meizhu Lui , of Hawaii, James and Bayard Love, of North Carolina.

“I was able to learn from others how their work is impacting racial equity issues,” Gourdine said. “What is very clear is that there are others willing to devote their careers to addressing social justice issues as it relates to race.”

Next steps from the symposium include a preconference workshop, “Principles and Strategies for Undoing Institutional Racism in Health and Human Service Organizations,” before the July 2014 NASW National Conference (naswconference.org), and recommendations that focus on social work education, NASW chapters, updating NASW’s Institutional Racism Toolkit, and collaboration with other organizations, such as the Child Welfare League of America and Alliance for Families.

A summary of the think tank will be posted on SWPI’s website at socialworkpolicy.org

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