

This Social-Work Manager Feels She Makes a Difference

By Bryan Keogh

Social worker, counselor and related manager careers are among those that made CareerJournal.com's "best careers" list. For a look at what it's like to work in the field, we recently spoke with Marilyn Reinish. Ms. Reinish is manager of social work at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, Ill., a Chicago suburb. She had taught elementary school for 17 years, and changed careers to help children cope with illness as a pediatric oncology social worker at Loyola. She spent 17 years as a clinical social worker and has been in her current role for three years. She oversees a staff of 43, advising and supporting counselors in their work with hospital patients, in addition to her administrative duties. Social-work managers in Chicago earn between \$64,626 and \$81,606, according to Salary.com.

CareerJournal: What's a typical day like?

Ms. Reinish: The day sometimes begins with the evening news the night before. When you work in a large medical center, you often get an early report from the news broadcast when you hear about a trauma, or a bum, or a high-profile patient who has been taken to the facility where you are From the moment your feet hit the floor, you're off and running.

I'm on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, as an administrator. My calls during the nighttime and evening hours have to do with case consultation for patients in the ER, child advocacy, [Illinois Department of Children and Family Services] reports for abuse and neglect, domestic violence, and psych. All of those types of cases are where questions arise.

CJ: Describe an encounter with patients that's typical.

Ms. Reinish: It usually involves a warm hug, a hello. People cry with us, because we're a safe place to talk ... Sometimes with a long-term patient, and even with a new patient, if you say, 'tell me how you're feeling,' you've opened a door to enable them to talk about something that doesn't have to do with how much medicine they're taking and if their leg hurts or not.

CJ: How many hours a week do you work on average?

Ms. Reinish: I think 55. I like to leave here and leave it behind me. So I will stay rather than bring work home. If there is something going on here, and I know I'm going to have to be involved, I won't leave until I'm more comfortable that I won't be called 19 times.

CJ: How do you balance your work and your home life?

Ms. Reinish: In many ways, what I do is isolating from friends, because they don't want to hear it. So when we go out, I try to leave my work behind -- and am fairly successful. And I can do that because of the tremendous support I have with my colleagues ... When you go out, you don't have to recount every gory detail, because you've already done that with your colleagues.

CJ: How much autonomy do you typically have?

Ms. Reinish: We say on a daily basis, 'You cannot send this patient home.' Whether it refers to abuse and neglect, whether it refers to the fact that mentally they cannot cope, whether we think they should be hospitalized in another facility, especially with a senior, we have to stand our ground.

I'll give you a very good example. A graduate student was interviewing and working with a mother, who had just delivered her fourth child, I believe. She was suicidal and shared that with the social-work student. We had a psychiatric evaluation, which would be standard procedure. Psych did not feel that she needed to be hospitalized,

that she could be discharged. The student felt that, absolutely, that couldn't occur. She went to her field instructor, who listened, who thought: 'This student knows exactly what she's saying.' And they dug their heels in and went to the obstetrical attending.

Bottom line, after much intervention, the mother was sent to a hospital, a psychiatric hospital. About three months later, she returned to the hospital for another procedure, and when the field instructor of this student went to see her, the woman said to her, if it hadn't been for so and so, the student, I would not be alive today. I was going to kill myself.

CJ: How stressful is the social work field?

Ms. Reinish: My stress now is administrative. The stress that a social worker feels is way too many people and too much to do and not enough hours in the day. If they have to make discharge arrangements for 18 patients, the multitasking part of their job is stretched to the max. They have to call this facility, call that wife, arrange transportation -- that gets crazy. My stress is with reports that are due, documents that have to be prepared. I have to meet with staff, provide consultation. It's never-ending. And that's why I'm here so late at night. And that is why I eat candy. If I am stressed, you can be assured there are probably M&M's not too far away.

CJ: How satisfied are you in this career?

Ms. Reinish: Being able to put pieces together to solve a problem is tremendously gratifying. Whether it's marital counseling, fertility, whatever the issue is.

In terms of a career choice, I know I've made a difference, and that is the most gratifying feeling to me that I could have ... There's nothing else that I could think of that I'd rather done.

CJ: What's the pay like in this field?

Ms. Reinish: It's not fabulous; our salaries are not the highest around. But there is a payoff for those of us who do this. And that is just our personality makeup. Three members of my family are social workers. So in spite of not being the wealthiest people on the block, the gains that we personally receive are obviously greater. And that's probably why people like me remain with the work. We almost receive more than it feels that we're giving. But on a long day, my husband might say otherwise.

I feel that anyone employed in social work in a hospital has a very secure job because the psycho-social needs of the population are getting worse. And even in facilities where social workers were cut, they all are hired back.

CJ: Why did you decide to switch from teaching to social work?

Ms. Reinish: As I was teaching, I became much more concerned as to the emotional reasons clouding the ability of children to learn. If I could help them with their emotional issues, then they could learn better. As a social worker I help make coping and adapting possible. And, to me, that was a much greater personal satisfaction than [seeing a child earn] a 100 on a test.

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Email your comments to: cjeditor@dowjones.com.

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