

CAREERS IN SOCIAL & COMMUNITY SERVICES



Thelma Cruz, LSW
Community and Health Coordinator/Mental Health Navigator
El Centro De Servicios Sociales
Lorain, OH

Q. How did you become interested in your particular field?

A. I have always been the type of person who likes to help others. As a child I would go to appointments with my mom and her friends who only spoke English to assist with interpretation. As an adult I always found myself in doctor's offices or at schools with parents who were very frustrated about their inability to talk to doctors and teachers because of language barriers. I was always more than happy to help but there was only so much I could do. I had a neighbor who was going to school for Social Work and she, along with my husband, encouraged me to go back to school and get a degree. Through the partnership between Lorain County Community College (LCCC) and Youngstown State University (YSU), the support and encouragement of my husband, children and friends, I was able to earn my degree and pass my licensing exam. The education I received has given me the skills and knowledge necessary to better help those in need.

Q. How did you get to where you are today?

A. After graduating from YSU, I started working as a mental health therapist providing Intensive Home Based Therapy to children at their homes and schools. One day I was approached by El Centro about an exciting and new position they were starting in collaboration with Lorain County Board of Mental Health to address the barriers that were impeding individuals from getting the mental health services they or their children needed. The idea of having a central number where people could call to talk to someone in English or Spanish who could assist them in not only making the appointment to the right mental health agency, but also in eliminating the barriers of payment, transportation, and language was exactly what my community needed. I was excited to get started. I am pleased to serve as the first Lorain County Navigator, making it easier for families to find mental health services when they call me at 440-240-7025.

In addition, as the Community and Health Coordinator for El Centro, my team and I have been able to educate our community through classes and group presentations in English and Spanish that focus on buying and making healthier food choices using the My Plate model, a 7 week course developed by Stanford University that educates us on how to take control of our chronic illnesses, and a 10 week course that educates parents on how to prepare their children for college and how to become more involved in their children's school and education.

Q. What skills or certifications do you think are needed to be successful in this field?

A. I think it is very important to have great listening and communicating skills in order to best advocate and assist our clients. Being a critical thinker, having empathy, and organizational skills are also very important to have. I believe that it is vital for success in my field to be Licensed Social Worker (LSW).

Q. What is the best part of your job?

A. The best part of my job is providing the assistance, advocacy, and education that a client needs to help them with their difficult situation. This can be by connecting them to the right mental health agency through our Mental Health Navigator line. It can also be through educating the community through group presentations that are held at El Centro on how to eat and live healthier, how parents can better engage in their children's schools, or how to take better control of our chronic illnesses.

SOCIAL WORKERS

The type of work

- Assess clients' needs, situations, strengths, and support networks to determine their goals.
- Help clients adjust to changes and challenges in their lives, such as illness, divorce, or unemployment.
- Research, refer, and advocate for community resources, such as food stamps, childcare, and healthcare to assist and improve a client's well-being.
- Respond to crisis situations such as child abuse and mental health emergencies.
- Follow up with clients to ensure that their situations have improved.
- Evaluate services provided to ensure that they are effective.
- Develop and evaluate programs and services to ensure that basic client needs are met.
- Provide psychotherapy services

THE FUTURE OUTLOOK

Employment of social workers is projected to grow 12 percent from 2014 to 2024, faster than the average for all occupations.

Employment growth will be driven by increased demand for healthcare and social services, but will vary by specialty.

Work Environment

Social workers are employed in a variety of settings, including mental health clinics, schools, child welfare and human service agencies, hospitals, settlement houses, community development corporations, and private practices. They generally work full time and may need to work evenings, weekends, and holidays.

How to Become a Social Worker

Although most social workers need a bachelor's degree in social work, clinical social workers must have a master's degree and 2 years of post-master's experience in a supervised clinical setting. Clinical social workers must also be licensed in the state in which they practice.

The following are examples of types of social workers:

- Child and family social workers
- Clinical social workers
- School social workers
- Healthcare social workers
- Mental health & substance abuse social workers

Pay

The median annual wage for social workers was \$45,900 in May 2015.

Elaine Irene Zemanek
Social Worker
Lorain County Children Services
Elyria, OH



Q. How did you become interested in your particular field?

A. Growing up, I attended Catholic grade school and the nuns would talk about starving and hurting children all around the world and listening to their stories, I knew that one day, I too wanted to help others. My father, a recovering alcoholic, also had a huge impact on my desire to help others. It was not uncommon to have other recovering alcoholics seeking help sitting at our kitchen seeking counsel from my father. I would sit and listen and watch him bring peace to many. I wanted to be like him. My mother taught me the value of hard work.

Q. How did you get to where you are today?

A. At the age of 14, my father passed away and I knew as one of 10 children, financially, there was not the means to pay for my college education. Therefore, I followed in my brothers footsteps and joined the United States Air Force right out of high school. The Air Force, I knew, had a college tuition program that would allow me to follow my dreams of becoming a social worker. I served in the USAF from 1981 to 1985 and then joined the Air National Guard 179th Airlift Wing (Mansfield) from 1985-2006 serving in varying positions. In 1985 I was accepted to attend college at Kent State University and received my bachelor's degree in Family & Consumer Sciences in 1989. From KSU I attended Miami University where I graduated with a Master's in Family & Consumer Sciences in 1991. After completion of my graduate studies I interviewed with, and was hired by, Lorain County Children Services in 1993 and where I just recently celebrated 25 years as a social worker. While working full-time at LCCC I attended another graduate program through Case Western Reserve University where I received my Master of Science in Social Administration in 2003.

Q. What changes have you seen in the last few years in your industry?

A. In the past 25 years, I would say that the field of social work continues to strive for excellence and a higher level of professionalism. Rules and policies are developed to hold workers to a high standard of providing the best care to families and children in need. Continuing education requirements are put into place to ensure that social workers have the latest research on what are the most effective tools and strategies in working with children and families so that we can provide the best services available.

Q. What is the best part of your job?

A. Without hesitation, the best part of my job is working with children. They are curious, they are resilient and they are full of life. In child welfare, the needs of children vary, but in working with them it pushes you to work for the best outcome for their lives. Watching a child's self-esteem and confidence grow with time and good interventions, truly, is priceless.

Q. Do you have any words of advice for someone considering a career in your field?

A. I believe you have to determine where your passion lies. Is it working with adults, children or the elderly? Explore what fields of social work are out there - you could work in many environments and in many differing types of settings. Volunteer and seek out internships that help you to determine the best fit for you and your personality. What I share with you, is that if you truly give your heart to this profession you will be challenged to the core of your being, and you will learn that you are the one who is changed - for the better.

Sponsors



Elyria City School District



Sources: Occupational Information Network, O*Net Online, <http://online.onetcenter.org>.** U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, <http://stats.bls.gov/ocoeHow.com>