

IF there was one activity which Amy Bala especially enjoyed during her school days, it was her volunteer work at hospitals, old folk's homes and orphanages.

Along with her church members, she engaged in a variety of "people services" activities to make the lives of patients, inmates and children a little more comfortable.

It was this innate desire to help the less privileged that prompted her to join the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) after leaving school.

"I have always liked working with people and helping those in need. Joining the department gave me lots of opportunity to continue in that direction," says the 62-year-old retiree who remains an active social worker.

On joining the department, she discovered that social work involved more than just helping out or giving aid to the less privileged.

"It is also about helping them organise their life and empowering them to work towards their own well-being through counselling, guidance, resources and support.

"And that is basically what sets it apart from volunteer or charity work because it is a skill that requires professional training," explains Amy, who has some 39 years of experience in the field of social work.

The definition of a social worker and what constitutes social work is often misunderstood as anyone who does volunteer or charity work is often called a social worker.

Foemur Welfare Department director-general Datoq Shamsiah Abdul Bahman says although social, welfare and charity work have a common base — in wanting to help the less privileged — social work is a highly skilled field as one needs to have the right knowledge and training in dealing with their clients.

"This comes with proper training in the field of social work. It is not just a matter of lending a helping hand or having a caring heart. You have to have knowledge of human development and psychology. You need to be able to develop a functional and effective relationship with the client.

"You must be able to do some assessment on the client and plan for some form of intervention — whether it's remedial, developmental or preventive — and you have to follow the case through to the end. All this comes with specialised training."

Shamsiah stresses that experience also comes into play as one needs to know how to handle each situation as there is no absolute way of dealing with human problems.

"Welfare work and charity work are very noble activities and an

Trained to help society

In conjunction with World Social Work Day today, P. SELVARANI finds out what being a social worker means



A medical officer feeding children at an orphanage which was badly managed by untrained people

important part of the human services. But social work goes one step further," she says, adding that principles of human rights and social justice are the basis of social work.

Shamsiah, 60, who started out as a medical social worker, says social work encompasses many areas and not just helping the poor and those with disabilities. Social workers are not only employed by the welfare department but also by hospitals (medical social workers) and penitentiary institutions such as prisons.

Graduates with a degree in social work are also employed as human resource personnel in companies.

"Where there are human services, there should be social workers.

"It's time we also have social workers in schools as there are many children who need early intervention to help them deal with problems they may be facing at home or in their environment.

"Although we have school counsellors, not all of them are trained to detect and institute remedial intervention to help the children function within their environment. This is where school social workers can help the counsellors."

Amy, who is vice-president of the Malaysian Association of Social Workers (MASW) also stresses the need for the authorities to engage qualified people with the right aptitude for the job to ensure that those who are tasked to help society, do the "right thing".

"If the social worker is not trained properly, they can do more



The holistic needs of the less fortunate like these children are best handled by trained social workers



Social workers who are not trained properly can do more harm than good, says Amy

harm than good." She says there is also an urgent need to recognise social work as a profession, similar to teaching and nursing.

The need to regulate the industry has prompted the MASW to press for the legislation of a Social Workers Act.

The Act would ensure that only those who have the necessary social work qualifications are certified or licenced as a social worker.

"In many countries, social work graduates can only practise once they have registered or obtained a licence after passing an examination sanctioned by the national social work body," says MASW president Teoh Ai Hua.

He adds that although the MASW has been a member of Balai Iktisad Malaysia (Malaysian Professional Centre) since 1975, it has still not been able to persuade the government, particularly the Public Services Commission and



There is a need for a Social Workers Act to regulate the industry to meet competency standards, says Teoh

the Public Services Department to employ only graduates with a social work degree, or its equivalent, into social service agencies such as the DSW.

"When posts with important social work functions are filled by those not trained for the job, then the quality of service may be compromised.

"Once we are recognised as a profession, we will be able to do much more in terms of promoting competency standards, training, registration, licencing, employment and career advancement."

Teoh, 39, who was a lecturer in Social Work studies at Universiti Utara Malaysia, says there is also a need for universities and institutions of higher learning to standardise the syllabus for social work education.

"We are concerned about non-social work trained educators teaching social work at the universities, the lecturer-students ratio and also the quality of supervised



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practical training for social work students.

"In fact since 2000, social work educators from several public universities have initiated a grouping called The Joint-Council on Social Work Education (JCSWE) to improve the quality of social work education in the country.

"MASW works closely with JCSWE but the grouping does not have the power to ask all universities to comply with a standardised syllabus and practical training requirement."

He says the Malaysian Qualification Agency of the Higher Education Ministry cannot enforce the recommendation of JCSWE on social work programmes at local universities in the absence of a law on social work.

"We have to work hard for a Social Workers Act to address the issue of professional recognition and education," he adds.

■ selvarani@nstp.com.my