



SW

Social Work **Policy** Institute

COMPARATIVE EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH (CER) AND SOCIAL WORK: STRENGTHENING THE CONNECTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FROM THE NOVEMBER 16, 2009
SWPI INAUGURAL SYMPOSIUM

For a copy of the full report *Comparative Effectiveness Research and Social Work: Strengthening the Connection*, please visit www.SocialWorkPolicy.org.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM

Social Work Research and Comparative Effectiveness Research (CER): A Research Symposium to Strengthen the Connection was hosted by the Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI) of the NASW Foundation on November 16, 2009. It brought together experts from the research, practice, policy, and education arenas to examine how the social work profession might best contribute to the expanding attention to CER. Participants included representatives of federal research and service agencies, national organizations, health care delivery organizations, foundations, and academic institutions.

Presentations covered the federal agenda and definitions for CER, current knowledge about outcomes of social work effectiveness research, economic analysis of psychosocial interventions, strengthening the research-practice relationship, and the implications of CER for social work. The symposium resulted in an action plan to address further social work research, training of researchers and practitioners, interdisciplinary collaborations, research/practice connections, and communication and outreach efforts with the purpose of increasing social work's capacity to engage in CER.

WHAT IS COMPARATIVE EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH?

The intent of CER is to determine which health and health care delivery interventions work best for whom and under what conditions. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 provided \$1.1 billion for CER to be divided among the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Office of the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). These funds are to be used to conduct and synthesize research that assesses the comparative effectiveness of health care treatments and strategies of health care delivery, and to stimulate the development and use of clinical registries, data networks, and other forms of electronic health data that can be used for research on intervention outcomes (ARRA, 2009).

ARRA (2009) directed DHHS to create a Federal Coordinating Council (FCC) charged with constructing a recommended definition, prioritization criteria, strategic framework, a long term

outlook, and next steps for CER. Congress also requested that the Institute of Medicine (IOM) convene a study to identify the *Initial National Priorities for CER*, giving consideration to the FCC's report (ARRA, 2009; IOM, 2009). Key priorities center on identifying and addressing health disparities for diverse populations and persons with complex conditions, identifying gaps in the existing knowledge of healthcare, and expanding dissemination of CER outcomes. The FCC and IOM reports lay out several strategies to support CER through developing information infrastructure; conducting more robust CER through training and collaboration; ensuring research and findings are relevant to consumers and practitioners; and enhancing dissemination and translation of CER findings (DHHS, 2009; IOM, 2009).

SOCIAL WORK AND COMPARATIVE EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH

Social Work's Role in CER

Leadership by the social work profession is critical to ensure that social workers are key stakeholders in CER efforts. Researchers, practitioners, consumers, academics, and policy-makers should come together to address how CER will be most meaningful for consumers and practitioners. Such discussions should articulate how the social work perspective can add value to meeting the established CER priorities that encourage research on psychosocial needs.

Social work research engagement in CER may have two distinct or potentially overlapping pathways:

- **PATHWAY ONE** relates to the expertise and perspective on clients, systems, ethics, cultural competence, and communities that a social work researcher brings to the inter-disciplinary research team.
- **PATHWAY TWO** relates more specifically to research on the development and implementation and comparative effectiveness of specific interventions used by social workers.

General Effectiveness of Social Work Interventions and Considerations for CER

There is current research that shows the effectiveness of social work interventions (Mullen, Melly, Volland, & Shuluk, 2008). However, for CER, not only does there need to be more research on social work practice, but there also needs to be more rigorous research. Current limitations of research include small sample size, homogeneous samples, lack of comparison groups, investigator and publication bias, and lack of attention to attrition. Issues related to social work practice that need further exploration might include the uniqueness of social work interventions; the place for efficacy studies in social work research; the use of manualized interventions; and the identification of common elements of effective interventions (e.g., understanding the qualities of the worker-client relationship).

Strengthening Research-Practice Connections

Both the CER agenda and the social work profession's commitment to pursuing the process of evidence-based practice (EBP) (IASWR, 2007) call for stronger research-practice connections to enhance the relevance of research in practice. Practitioners need encouragement and incentives to observe and test the impact of interventions and share the lessons learned from practice in a

variety of environments. Research can be normalized and demystified by integrating it into professional education and by teaching clinicians that they have opportunities to conduct research in daily practice and should be life-long learners. Further, encouraging practitioners to engage in research should be coupled with health and human service organizations' efforts to partner with research teams at universities and other research groups.

Building Infrastructure and Methodological Capacity of CER

The proposed research priorities and intent of CER presents multiple methodological challenges to researchers. Expanding the scope of research to test interventions on heterogeneous samples in complex environments means that greater efforts will be needed to engage different populations in research studies. Using randomized designs, and qualitative and mixed methods studies as well as community-based participatory research designs will help to mitigate these methodological challenges. Engaging consumers in planning research and identifying questions that need further study will be important aspects of building CER capacity. Social workers commonly use these diverse research methods and also have insight about how to navigate multiple delivery systems. These are skills that social workers can contribute to interdisciplinary research teams. Therefore, it is essential to train social work researchers in CER methodologies so that they can conduct CER in a variety of environments and work together with other disciplines and community stakeholders.

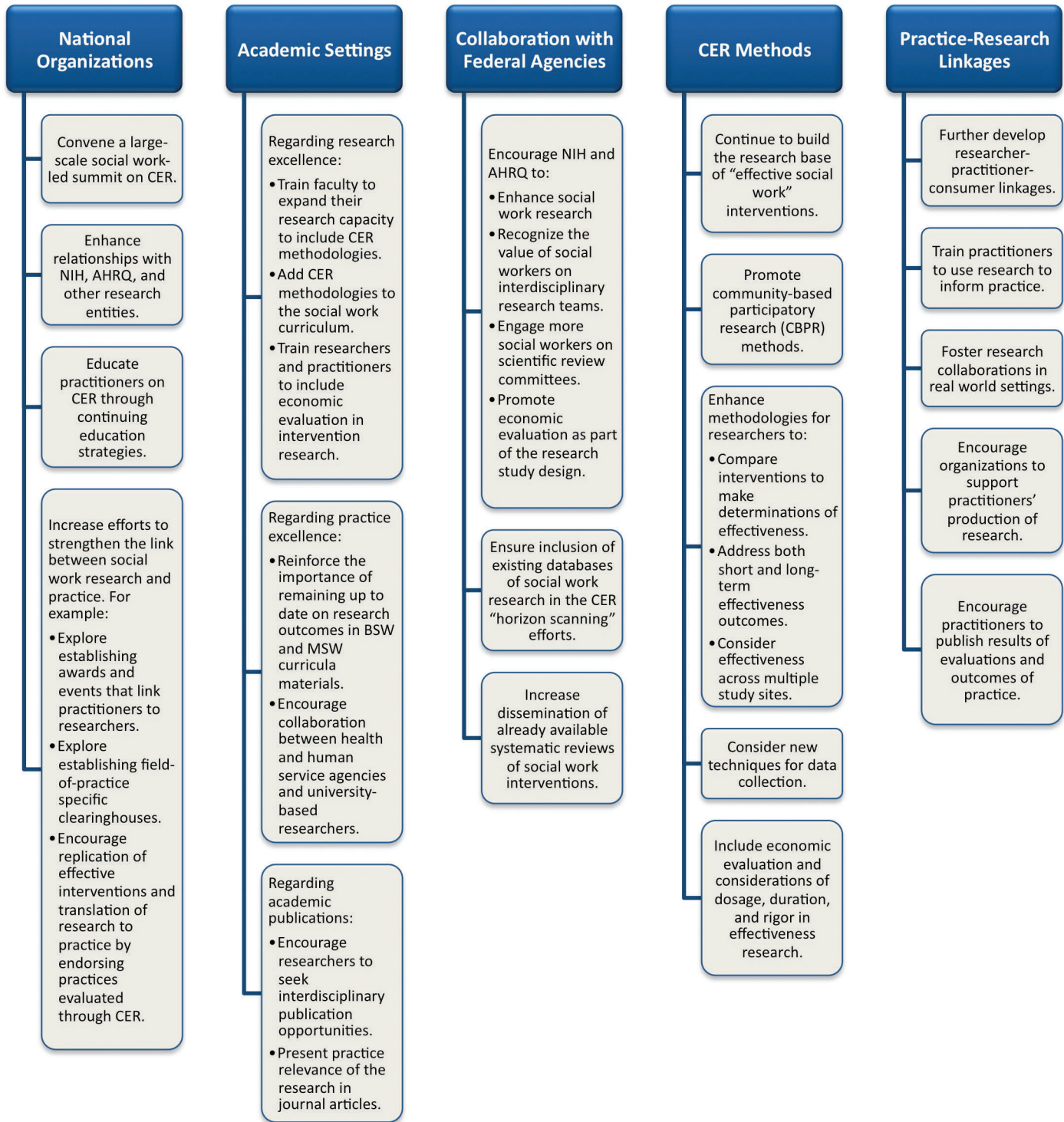
Systematic reviews will be an important aspect of CER in determining the differential effectiveness of interventions. Current limitations of social work research diminish the capacity to conduct systematic reviews of many social work practices. High quality rigorous research is needed for relevant systematic reviews to be conducted that can increase social work's inclusion in future CER databases.

For practitioners and researchers, understanding and using meaningful economic evaluation methods when conducting intervention research studies should be an essential. Such tools can be valuable to program decision-making and for setting health and mental health policy when attempting to comparatively maximize outcomes and minimize costs. So often in delivering psychosocial services, resources are limited and hard choices about care need to be made. Economic evaluation strategies can assist in demonstrating the value provided from the resources expended. This is particularly relevant for CER, because a key public concern about this new emphasis on CER is that decisions might be made based solely on cost. Review panels, foundations, federal agencies, academic institutions, and national organizations should stress the importance of including relevant methods of economic evaluation in research.

Recommended Agenda for Action

The intent of CER is to determine what works best, for whom, and under what conditions. Both the FCC and IOM CER reports call for increased efforts to develop and understand intervention outcomes specifically for diverse populations with co-occurring diagnoses and an array of psychosocial needs. This has great relevance for social work, since social work research deals with complex person-in-environment contexts, and studies how to address psychosocial needs from an individual, family, community, organization, and systems perspective. Furthermore, social workers' ethical commitment to social justice can be translated into addressing issues of diversity and cultural competence in designing and implementing research. The following highlights actions that can be taken to enhance social work's involvement with and contributions to CER.

Recommended Social Work Actions to Enhance CER



Recommendations for National Organizations

- Convene a large-scale social work-led summit with consumers, practitioners, and researchers on how social work can enhance its role in CER.
- Continue to build social work membership and research organizations' relationships with NIH and AHRQ and other research entities.
- Educate practitioners on CER through continuing education strategies.
- Explore establishing awards and events that would link practitioners to researchers, and encourage replication of effective interventions and translation of research to practice by endorsing practices that are extensively evaluated through CER.
- Explore establishing field of practice specific clearinghouses for researchers and practitioners as a membership incentive.
- Increase efforts to expand the link between social work research and practice including using new technologies in both research and dissemination activities.

Recommendations for Academic Settings

Regarding research excellence

- Train faculty to expand their research capacity to include CER methodologies including encouraging social work research centers to serve as models for multi-site CER.
- Add CER methodologies to the social work curriculum.
- Train researchers and practitioners to include economic evaluation in intervention research.

Regarding practice excellence

- Reinforce the importance of remaining up to date on research outcomes in BSW and MSW curricula materials, including in practice classes.
- Encourage collaboration between health and human service agencies and university-based researchers.

Regarding academic publications

- Review tenure, promotion, and academic reward structures in social work to encourage researchers to seek interdisciplinary publication opportunities.
- Consider the revision of the structure of social work journal articles to present the limitations' section in a more constructive way, and include a section in each article on the relevance of the research to practice.

Recommendations for Collaboration with Federal Agencies

- Encourage NIH and AHRQ to enhance social work research including recognition of the value of social workers on interdisciplinary CER teams and engagement of more social workers on scientific review committees.
- Ensure inclusion of existing databases of social work research in the CER “horizon scanning” efforts, and increase dissemination of already available systematic reviews of social work interventions (e.g. Campbell Collaboration reviews).
- Encourage NIH and AHRQ to promote economic evaluation as part of the research study design and to expand the knowledge-base of scientific review committees regarding economic evaluation.

Recommendations to Enhance CER Methods

- Develop methodologies for researchers to compare interventions to make determinations of effectiveness including addressing short and long-term effectiveness outcomes and effectiveness across multiple study sites.
- Consider new techniques for data collection that can expedite data collection, promote dissemination of research findings, and compare datasets from multiple sites that are implementing the same interventions.
- Include economic evaluation and considerations of dosage, duration, and rigor in effectiveness research.
- Promote community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodologies and encourage CBPR researchers to get involved with NIH, AHRQ, and DHHS’s CER efforts.
- Continue to build the research base of “effective social work” interventions.

Recommendations to Promote Practice-Research Linkages

- Further develop researcher/practitioner/client linkages as a standard of practice.
- Train practitioners about how research can be used to inform practice and foster research collaborations in real world settings.
- Encourage organizations to support practitioners’ use and production of research by integrating research skills into clinical training programs within universities and agencies, and encourage practitioners to publish results of evaluations and outcomes of practice.

The social work profession and especially the social work research enterprise is well-positioned to be fully engaged with Comparative Effectiveness Research efforts based on the definitions, priorities, strategies, and challenges laid out by the federal government. Attention needs to be given to continuing to build social work effectiveness research; involving social workers as part of interdisciplinary research teams; ensuring that findings from social work research are included in data and research repositories and systematic reviews; encouraging participatory research efforts that fully engage service providers and consumers; encouraging economic evaluation as an integral part of research studies; facilitating innovative research dissemination strategies and strengthening research/practice/policy linkages. Professional and scientific societies, universities, service provider agencies, consumers and funders of research and services all have important roles to play in ensuring the health and well-being of our society, especially those at highest risk to experience health disparities.

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ABOUT THE SOCIAL WORK POLICY INSTITUTE

The Social Work Policy Institute was established in October 2009 and is a division of the NASW Foundation. Its mission is:

- To strengthen social work's voice in public policy deliberations.
- To inform policy-makers through the collection and dissemination of information on social work effectiveness.
- To create a forum to examine current and future issues in health care and social service delivery.

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