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- Elected Office as a Social Work Career Path
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**Peter** [00:00:01] Hi, everybody from the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Welcome to the In Social Work podcast. It's great, as always to have you along. I don't know if you've heard, but we're going to elect a new president here in the United States. I'm Peter Sobota. As we approach a historical and unprecedented fall 2024 election cycle, U.S. citizens appear to have plenty of pretty dismal feelings about politics in general and elected officials. And this includes the quality of the people running for office. Public opinion doesn't seem pretty. Many voters feel angry, exhausted, and in some cases, kind of hopeless. Interestingly, and so far, a number of us probably not enough, are still voting. Social workers who are drawn to macro level practice often cite the lack of jobs available that focus on these issues, and then add comments about the poor salaries. Social workers possess a lot of skills. And while many apply these in relatively traditional social work settings, these skills are very well suited to political activity and policy work, and even more so, political office. The Room Where it Happens. Standard six in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, addresses a social workers ethical responsibilities to the broader society. Elected office seems like an ideal way to adhere to our concerns about social welfare, public participation, and social and political action. On today's show, our guest, Erica Pence, PhD, will review her scholarship focusing on social workers and elected office and make the case that social workers are a really good fit for a role in the political arena. She will share what she's learned from interviewing social workers who have run and served in political office and share recommendations for aspiring social workers looking to pursue a political career. Doctor Pence also has some suggestions for social work program curriculums and professional organizations about how to better prepare their colleagues and students for successful political action in elected office. Erica Pence, MSW, Ph.D., is assistant professor of social work at Eastern Washington University School of Social Work.

**Peter** [00:02:42] Hi, Erica. Welcome to social work.

**Erica** [00:02:45] Hi, Peter. Thanks for having me today.

**Peter** [00:02:47] Oh, no. It's our pleasure. Thanks for agreeing to do this and taking the time. We do. We do appreciate it. So I know you're in the Pacific Northwest, but I'm going to ask you anyway, because I'm envious and I'm bitter. And I want you to tell me the weather is awful. So I feel better about the whole thing and the fact that I'm on the East Coast. What's going on over there?

**Erica** [00:03:10] It is a little bit, awful ish today.

**Peter** [00:03:14] Oh, good. Okay. Keep going.

**Erica** [00:03:15] A high of 99, and we're under a heat advisory and have been so. But we don't have the the humidity that you all have over that way, so.

**Peter** [00:03:25] Oh, you had to throw that in. Okay. All right. That's so this is the it's the dry heat story okay. Yeah. Well, well, listeners who, who aren't familiar with the, Pacific Northwest, Erica is in the desert of Washington state, near Spokane. So. All right. Here. Well, thank you for putting up with that. I know, I and I, we just interviewed another person from the Pacific Northwest, and it's starting to bug me. All right, so, I usually start our our conversations, too, by briefly asking, our guests. I'm always curious because the stories have been really interesting how our guests, in your case, how you came to the

social work profession, if you'd be willing to tell us that. And, and then, how you became interested in the topic for our conversation today, which is, you know, social workers, you know, running for elected office. So if you'd be willing to take me up on that, would you do that as best you can? The abridged version.

**Erica** [00:04:35] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I'll start with. Yeah. How I got into social work. Yeah. You know, some folks, you know, grew up, having social workers as parents or social workers in their life. I didn't know any social workers. I don't think I knew it was a profession when I was young. I always enjoyed volunteering in high school, and college did a lot of that. I ended up graduating. My undergrad is in sociology. I did my a bounced around a little bit, but my first couple years were at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, and, they now have both a B.S. and MSW program, but at the time, you know, spent several years ago, they only have them study program. But, across the university, you could take like an intro to social work course that fulfilled one of my gen eds. And so I took it and was fascinated. And if there would have been a program at that time, I probably would have explored it more. But I stuck with sociology, fell in love with it in a big lecture. Social 100. I still remember the professor's name, Doctor Judith Tarr. She was doing some really cool. Her and her husband had started an, intergenerational, living compound facility outside of champagne. Oh, wow. I remember hanging out. The class was, like, until 3:00 on a Friday, right? Everybody's ready to get out. And the bell went off, and she's still talking. And I stayed for probably another half hour because I was fascinated. So, I often wonder if that is why. I'm, I'm, I gravitate and that macro and policy is my jam because I was, you know, have a sociology background. Yeah. I was I think that's interesting thinking about what folks at a psych minor. So, but I've always kind of been systems thinker.

**Peter** [00:06:40] I would, I would if you can, I would like you to bottle and pass that jam around more. I'm just like, yeah, yeah, I know you're trying. Well, yeah, we have a lot of clinical social workers, and I, you know, I was kind of one of those too, so. But yeah, let's get that jam out and mass production. Yeah.

**Erica** [00:06:59] Yeah. So I ended up, transferred, ended up graduating from, Saint Ambrose University, a small, school in Davenport, Iowa. They also now have a program, but did not. So I stuck with sociology. I, you know, loved it. But in my senior seminar class, we had folks from the MSW program come in and say, you know, a lot of, folks come into social work with sociology backgrounds. We went to you about the program, and that was when I was really okay. I think social work, you know, is somewhere that I want to go. At the same time, I wanted to graduate, make, you know, a little bit of money and, come back. But I had always, you know, that planted kind of the, like, an MSW, worked for a handful of years. I sold real estate. I worked at a nonprofit daycare. And then I spent a couple years working for Big Brothers Big Sisters. And at that point, about, you know, a year into my two years, I was like, okay, I'm ready to start thinking about going back to school and getting my MSW. So, did that and, went in thinking clinical realm, right? Yeah. My entry, common admission essay was like, I want to be a therapist. Which kudos to therapist. We need them to. But shortly after starting the program, we had two policy courses in the program. And first semester, I was sitting in the first policy course and fell in love with it. I had, Professor Johnny Augustine, who was still a mentor of mine, and a big reason I fell in love with policy and went on to get a PhD. So that kind of set the stage there and kind of really set my. Trajectory and passion for policy, and did a couple years of practice and then went and got my PhD. And, currently I'm doing academia and, so we'll see what else. There's a whole I've still got a, whole career and there's so many other things that I want to do. So we'll see. Yeah. Where I go from here.

**Peter** [00:09:14] Yeah. I'm always shocked how serendipitous some of these journeys are. And I and mine was kind of like that too. But it's really interesting. And I think you already answered the question and how you got into, or maybe you did it about why, you know, political office became an interest of yours.

**Erica** [00:09:34] Yeah. Which that wasn't really anything, you know, in my master's program that was out. Right. It was policy, but certainly policy, I think is the big foundation and base. And we've got to have that for them thinking about social workers and elected office. So, specifically for like this, the study in this topic, I started the PhD program, with my kind of interest, which, you know, I'd had from, I'd come from living on a farm and seeing food systems on a, you know, personal level. And what that looks like and the, the myths around the amount of food that we create or what's accessible, as well as some of my practice experience, with creating some food programming and, working with on site school food pantries. So when I started my PhD program, that was and still is, you know, aside from this topic, food access and food justice is a, you know, big interest. And I've done a lot of research in it. So second semester of my PhD program. So this would have been 20 19th January of 2019. I was in a qualitative course and we had to design a study. And so I was thinking food stuff. But then I also started, you know, this topic was kind of bubbling. At that time, we've been starting the third year of the Trump administration. Right. And thinking about all of these policies that are being talked about and past that are so antithetical to social work and just basic human rights, right? Not even social work, just basic human rights. And thinking about, well, we know this stuff is social workers. And like in order to get socially just policies passed, like we should be in public office. Right. And so I thought, you know, this class project is the perfect opportunity to do that. So I went that trajectory and, continue to after the class. You know, it wasn't the intention of the course to do a whole study and publish it, although I do have some classmates that did that as well. So I pursued that. And that's how this study came to me.

**Peter** [00:11:52] Yeah. Well thank you. That was it. Yeah. Again, makes it's interesting certain courses certain people would need along the way kind of light us up and, and get us movement in ways that sometimes we never expected. So thanks in. All right. So let's get let's get to the the stuff here today. Yeah. So you know what what you're talking I was thinking. Yeah. It's about time, social workers got in the room where it happens, so to speak. So, how about this? Okay, let's, let's see if we can kind of set the playing field a little bit. Could you spend a little time telling us this? Your take about what? The playing field is for social workers who seek or hold elective office and and maybe even. I don't even know if that was a great question, but even if you could, maybe you know how many social workers are doing this. I know you've looked into this. So what is the playing field and how many of us are or are not? Holding a weapon?

**Erica** [00:13:02] Yes. So the good thing is that there are several social workers in elected office. So when we when we think about right in terms of how many just think about in in Congress, right. US Congress. You know, we've got 100 senators and 435 representatives, right. And, that a very small fraction are social workers. But then we also have, state and local office, which is really important as well. So I jotted down, I made notes because I wanted to name folks and make sure that I've, I've got that. But, so I want to start federal level, and crisp the Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy. Their website is [crisp inc.org](http://crispinc.org). Do a nice job of, keeping, website with social workers in US Congress. So right now we have a handful of them. We have a couple in the Senate. Debbie Stabenow from Michigan, has been, in elected office, for over two decades. And then Kirsten cinema, from Arizona. And she's been, in that role for about five years. And

then we have three in the US House of Representatives currently. Barbara Lee from California, who's been at it since 1998. Right. So she's got time into which is fantastic. Sylvia Garcia from Texas. And then the newest member, in U.S. Congress is Hillary Skelton, from Michigan. And she was elected in 2022. So that is who we have at the federal level at this point. And then, another noteworthy, certainly, we've been at this as social workers for over 100 years. Jeanette Rankin, who was a social worker, was first, social worker elected to Congress back in 1916. So we do have, a history there. Another prominent name. She retired, about seven years ago, I think, in 2017. But Barbara Mikulski, Maryland served for 30 years in the Senate. And prior to that, had a decade in the House. So she, you know, was a public servant, for over 40 years. So definitely, some trailblazers coming out of social work. So that's fantastic. At the state and local level, numbers are, not. So it's not so easy. We don't have a, and that's I think I'll touch on that later. We'll probably get to, you know, what can be done. Next up to, National Association of Social Workers. On their website, keeps a list of social workers in elected office. However, you know, I don't know how often that's updated. I was looking at it to see what they've got for numbers now. And I just know from, some folks that I know that should be on the list that aren't and then some that are, that are no longer in office. So I've made myself a note to email them with updates. So, but they currently there's 212 listed on their roster. So, you know, again, that number, I think it's probably, you know, fairly accurate. And that is, that encompasses state office. So, state legislatures, state senators, state representatives, as well as, everything local from library boards to city councils to mayors, county commissioners.

**Peter** [00:17:03] Those are all included in the numbers you just gave us. Yes. Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Because I'm sorry for interrupting. Because when, you know, I think about I think a lot of the students who at least I talked to. So this is purely anecdotal, but, you know, we talk about Congress and, you know, higher level federal kind of stuff. And they're super intimidated. Right. And, you know, I talk about state levels, county legislatures. And then I say, you know, if you really want to make a difference in your community, you know, you'd be hard pressed to find better opportunities than. Serving on the library board. I mean, that's a hot spot. Yeah, I mean, that's that's even something you should be scared of doing at this point. Or even the school board. Yeah. Which I and those numbers probably aren't as easily included in those that you just said. So. Right. I guess if you allow me this and feel free not to allow me this if you disagree. But, if we talk about how many social workers tend to navigate toward this kind of career trajectory, that's not really a lot. Know who we are?

**Erica** [00:18:21] No. Yeah. You think about 212, even if that's off somewhat. Think about. Right. All of the state, all of the communities, all the libraries, that we have across the country. Yeah.

**Peter** [00:18:33] So given who we are, our mission, our values, all this kind of improving the lives of people stuff, social justice that we have stood for for a long time and these kind of tiny little numbers. I'm going to say this as eloquently as possible. What's the deal with that?

**Erica** [00:18:58] I think I think there's, a number of reasons, but before I just thought in, in talking about my list, there is, another name that I want to specifically list, and then I'll.

**Peter** [00:19:09] Get one more. Okay.

**Erica** [00:19:10] Let's see. Here I am digressing a bit. Yeah. So I think this is really cool because, just last year, in 2023, we had, in, Katie Hobbs, is a social worker from, er.

**Peter** [00:19:29] Katie Hobbs is a social worker.

**Erica** [00:19:31] Yes. She. And she is the first social worker elected as a governor in one of our US states. And that just happened last year. So that's, so that's exciting. So I wanted to mention that.

**Peter** [00:19:44] Yeah.

**Erica** [00:19:46] Yeah. So then I guess in, in talking about. Yeah. Why aren't there more? It's a combination of reasons. Right. And this has been highlighted in research and certainly, with the folks in, in my study said. You know, a big one is fear right there. Fear of politics. Fear of knowing what you can and cannot do and thinking about when it comes to campaigning and what you can talk about or can't talk about. Right. So so that was one. That's that's been, you know, talked about a lot, about in the research and certainly as a, I teach both undergrad and master's courses at, at eastern. And that's something that the students talk about too, this, this kind of fear or being intimidated by, by policy. So that's that's a big one. So we've got a right chip away at that. Bust that myth that, politics are scary, right? Yeah. Another big one, right? Elected office itself is not talked about or taught, or promoted as a social work career trajectory. Right? I mean, let alone kind of policy. And I mean, it's certainly there are policy courses and curriculums, you know, maybe brag a little bit later about one of the courses that that I teach that I'm proud of and hope that there are other courses like this across the country or that that folks start to think about incorporating these types of things. So I think that's a big one, right? The, rhetoric is that like social workers should be at the table to, advocate, kind of, on, on or for policies. Not that we should be the ones writing policies or in elected office. So I think that that's something that's.

**Peter** [00:21:49] A better argument. Yeah, I think what why? Yeah.

**Erica** [00:21:54] Yeah. So I think that's a big one too, right? Just the the idea, the trajectory, what all social work encompasses. There's still very much a heavy focus in social work education, on clinical practice. And again, you know, I'm not here to say, one or the other is better, right? If we all flew into policy and nobody was in the communities providing clinical work, we'd be in big trouble. And at the same time, if those of us that, you know, love policy and other macro areas, if we all, you know, move towards clinical, and forgot policy, things would be a mess too, right? So we don't, you know, there's we've got to have we've got to have both. But, I think the clinical focus that has historically been a part of social work education as well as I think there's a lot and this would be a whole other conversation is around licensure. Right. What it means to be a professional social worker and the prestige or thinking, certainly licensure is needed and required in a lot of clinical positions. There's a lot of areas of practice that you don't need it. I don't hold, a license. And actually, in looking at, and a roster of those in offices, not a ton are licensed. And so, you know, that whole piece has something to do with it, as well. And then again, I, I kind of got at this with fear, but that politics, right. The idea that you're going to be involved in politics.

**Peter** [00:23:39] Our all power over expression. Yeah.

**Erica** [00:23:44] Yeah. And I hear this a lot from my students, and it's, you know, I get it. But at the same time, I'm like, you know, I'm a firm believer that social work inherently is political, right? And I think we can, can get away with that. But I hear a lot of students that kind of loathe politics for various reasons.

**Peter** [00:24:02] Well.

**Erica** [00:24:03] And so, you know, maybe, you know, make.

**Peter** [00:24:06] Your own joke there. Everybody listening at home, but. Yeah. Go ahead.

**Erica** [00:24:09] Yeah, yeah. So, you know, I think that kind of, dislike of politics, and also. Right, like, what we know about politics, there's so much more, to it. You know, and at the same time, I'm not going to sit here and say things are peachy, right? In politics. We're sitting here, what, four days after, an attempted assassination on, former president and currently running for office. You know, President Trump. You know, there's a lot going on with voter disenfranchisement. Certainly at the federal level. Huge polarization. And so I certainly understand the disgust and the apathy. Right. I feel it, too, sometimes. Yep. And yet. Right, all the more reason for social work involvement.

**Peter** [00:25:08] With the person and environment people. Right? I mean, come on. So, yeah, you know, I don't know if if, if you have similar experiences, but, you know, I, I've been working in social work education now for. You know, 25 plus years. And, I've seen a pattern. And, I'll just share with you and see what you think. And again, I was a clinical social worker. So everybody who is going to get mad at me, please moderate your anger. But I think a lot of people, pursue a lot of students pursue, I would say traditional social work, tracks and they go to work in agencies and, and clinical positions and things like that. And then something very interesting happens, maybe 4 or 5, six, five years later, they realize, for example, if they're working in a school, they're just meeting another kid who lives in poor housing, in a poor neighborhood, without parks and without resources, and without parents who fill their house with books and take them to museums. But it's just another kid in that spot who is in trouble at school with a different face. But there's a never ending supply of these kids, and then it hits them for and in this example. There's a never ending supply of this, and there's our environment in action. And. What do I do to move upstream here a little bit? How do I how do I think about macro level interventions? That will put a nick in in the in the picture or whatever. That's a terrible metaphor, but a dent in the never ending supply of, you know, kids who live in substandard housing or stuff like that. And I don't know, have you had that, take on things as yet?

**Erica** [00:27:19] Yes. Yeah, I would agree. And I think. Yeah. So post MSW, I was in I worked for, Iowa State University Extension and outreach, and counties. And we were we had a family support program in several schools. And we're doing a number of really cool things. And, you know, so we're, they're providing kind of direct services to the families, to the teachers supporting the students. And yeah, at the same time, you're seeing the same things happen. And, and luckily, my, my former boss, who I did my internship, one of my, placements during my MSW with her in that program, as well as it was just a pilot program kind of picked up and really supported my love for policy and really helped me to see. Okay. Yep. Here we are. We're meeting we're working with this family to help them, you know, get X, y, z or do x, y, z. And at the same time, this is happening with how many kids in the school. So you know, we've got this these resources to address homelessness issues because of mckinney-vento legislation. Right and right. Yeah. Yes. And so there's that, connection. So again, you've got to have folks there in the schools or in the hospitals,

wherever it is. But yes, we also at the same time, have to have that, that systems piece and they just and.

**Peter** [00:28:57] Maybe that's the way it's got to be. Maybe people need to go out there and, and see this for themselves. But I'm always curious about how can I help people see this in a frontloaded way. Right. We can do both. We're capable of doing, you know, micro and macro, level interventions and practice and perspectives at the same time. The, so let's get you I know you've done you've done, some, some scholarship around social workers who helped and ran for elected office. And, and so I, I want to talk about that. You did a lot of in-depth interviews or a number of them at least. So what were that were there seems were there consistent takeaways from as you interviewed these folks about their experiences? You know, that that are just top of mind for you? The commonalities?

**Erica** [00:29:53] Yeah. Well, first of all, I'll say it is, you know, and this goes to kind of already what you and I have talked about, it's it's difficult to find those folks. Right? I mean, I started, you know, going through Ndsu and then did some snowball sampling of, you know, the social worker in office, like, oh, they're also a social worker. Like, you should reach out to them like, let me help you connect them. And so that like previous scholarship in wanting to learn more about social workers and, and public office, you know, it was, a difficult, so I was, interviewing social workers in Ohio specifically. I focus there. That's where I was, at Ohio State at the time, doing my, PhD. So, and the social workers I interviewed represented a number of, there weren't any, U.S. Congress offices held, but some state legislature, one, everybody had been elected and served at some point except, one of the participants had run for school board, but unsuccessfully had not been, elected. But several several things I'll just touch on, a few and then I think we'll probably even get to more as we lead into, you know, what can be done, I think for sure. Yeah. On that as well. But a big thing is, you know, in a sense that elected office is just like any other social work job, right? I think sometimes, again, there's this fear or it's like, oh, it's this big thing. You've got to have a law degree. You've got to be a business person. Pletely not the case, right? And it's, you know, a position that our, the skills that we learned in, you know, our, some of our most foundational skills to social work practice that we learn in our MSC program and then go on to use in various areas of practice, active listening. Right. The elected officials are you've got to be a good listener. You're listening to your constituents come in. Right. Whether that's a planned meeting or a lot of times at the local offices, they've got folks just, you know, coming in wanting to vent about or share their frustrations about. X, y, z. Right. And so, this active listening piece was huge relationship building. Right? We are, relationship builders in social work, and that's another huge one, right? Not only with the constituents, but with the, you know, your communities, your fellow, folks that are alongside you in elected office, building relationships with the community organizations that you're going to, you know, need funding and help run your programs, that your, your policies specify. So, that was big. Even things like motivational interviewing, some of my participants talked about using in their work as, elected officials, which I thought was really interesting.

**Peter** [00:33:12] I'm you people can't see me, but I'm kind of giggling because I've actually done some training here in, in Buffalo with motivational interviewing to people who work in some of the state senators offices. Oh, and, and and so it's just kind of like I, the easier there are telling you about some of the folks who come in and like you said, some of them are, you know, they've they're mad and they're complaining. And that whole kind of dealing with, resistance or now they call it sustained talk. They were it was like I gave them the million bucks. And, you know, here it's just you just those are great skills, I agree. Yeah.

Solution focused adaptations I think would be wonderful in situations like that. Sorry. Go ahead.

**Erica** [00:33:55] Yeah. So maybe even then, right as we're teaching those skills in social work education like here's oftentimes where you're where you think they're at. But hey you might use them in elected office right. Maybe that's another way to plug in the exposure.

**Peter** [00:34:11] Yeah. You know, I'm, I'm curious to go back to the people who you interviewed for your, your your paper and study. You told us a little bit about, you know, some were elected in various places. Did you talk with them about. How they felt their formal social work education. Prepared them or not for elective office? Yeah. Does that make any sense? I think you know what I mean.

**Erica** [00:34:43] Yep. Yeah. And a lot of it. One of the big pieces is, again, these foundational skills, right, that we oftentimes associate with, you know, more micro or mezzo practice that, you know, some of the skills that I just mentioned. These are those were, you know, critical to that. Some of the things that tended to, you know, not be there or be there so much as like, okay, well, none of them really learned how to, like, run a campaign and.

**Peter** [00:35:13] How to, like campaigning 101. Right. I know not in our program. Not that I'm aware of, at least. Yeah. I'm sorry.

**Erica** [00:35:21] Well, as, you know, I think, like, the budget, and administration stuff, money stuff, I think we certainly I know in some of our, you know, we get a little bit of that. So that was something, and, you know, I think there's, again, a balance in thinking about what we do in social work education. And, you know, what can social work organizations do? There's, you know, we've only got so many spots for courses and the content that we have to have for CSD and that sort of thing. So I think that's always going to be, a balance and determining what we can bring in and not. But so I guess with that being said, I'm saying, you know, like. Money is important, and I think there's often this kind of like joke which I don't really like. Like, social workers aren't good at math, right? Yeah. We can be okay with math. And, you know, budgets are important. And so we do in, one of the classes, the policy, MSW course that I teach, we do some stuff around budgets. And so I think just some foundational stuff is, important, you know, but, you know, they said the folks in my study said, you know, that tends to be not as prevalent or wasn't as, you know, embedded or even there at all in my education. And at the same time, there's a lot just like any other job you learn on the job, right? You've got around you. You don't walk into this, you know, you may be the only person holding that elected office, but you've got your, your, your people around you. Right. And so like anything else, you'll learn as you go. So I think that was another, important thing, that, you know, when we think about plugging and, and, and talking to students or just social workers about elected office, you know, you don't have to have, like, all of the skills like you as a social worker have come out of a social work education program, like you've got a solid set of skills that will then, right, like put you on, the springboard to kind of acquiring everything else. So I think that, you know, really stood out to me as well that, you know, we, we just because we are social workers and the education and the the values and the ethics that we, you know, practice by, that's kind of the solid foundation. You know, it's enough to get us in the door. And more than that, right, I think I, you know, I don't want to downplay that at all. And then, you know, we build on those skills and maybe hone in on the little pieces that we only got a little bit, in internships or.



**Peter** [00:38:13] Yeah, I when we start talking about, you know, organizational support and peer support and, and educational program, I want to ask you about some of that concrete stuff as well. But but the people who you interviewed. Did they think? And I don't know if you can even comment on this. I'm not sure. You know, you covered this specifically, but did they feel that their social work either education and experience helped them? In their. In their positions.

**Erica** [00:38:50] Yes. Yeah. Very much so. And, you know, there was not any, discussion of how, being a social work, had hindered them, I guess, if that mean.

**Peter** [00:39:06] Gotcha. It didn't it didn't hurt. Yeah. Well, yeah. I'm going to ask you about that later, too. So I'm gonna I'm going to save that. But the. Would they do it again? The people you interviewed. What? They run again.

**Erica** [00:39:22] I don't. I guess that wasn't necessarily a specific question I asked.

**Peter** [00:39:26] Okay.

**Erica** [00:39:27] Several of them were currently.

**Peter** [00:39:28] In, but they were still at it. Okay.

**Erica** [00:39:30] Yep. Some had, I think, retired, the one that not held elected office at all. You know, she wasn't currently looking to run again, but certainly, you know, talked about it as as being something that, you know, might be might be there for her, in the future. So.

**Peter** [00:39:53] Okay. Yeah. So I, I think we've I've kind of done this already, but I want to do this overtly. It's it's put Erica on the spot time here. So. And again, I think you've hinted at this, but I want to I want to see if I can kind of pin this down a little bit based on your knowledge, your experience, and your scholarship. Do you believe that social work. I'm asking you to speak. I know this is unfair, but I'm doing it anyway. Do you think social work education. And current professional organizations. Do a good job essentially of preparing students and social workers for not only. Garnering interest. But winning and being effective. So if I if I put you in charge of judgment. What you want. Do you even want a nibble on. No. There. I don't.

**Erica** [00:41:03] Know. Yeah. So I, I think there are, you know, some great things being done, right. But certainly from my anecdotal, it sounds like from yours, from the research I've done, from research that, you know, others have done. We need to do more, right? There's room for help. So I think that there are some well played.

**Peter** [00:41:31] Yeah.

**Erica** [00:41:32] Yeah. So I think that there are and, you know, and the again, the, the folks in my study highlighted, talked about, you know, some things that that can be done both, you know, in terms of social work organizations thinking about or social work programs, and then even themselves as social workers in elected office, like, how can we support this? Right. So.

**Peter** [00:42:01] Well, it's hard. It's it's kind of like it's hard to support people when we're a lot of us aren't there yet. Right. I think, you know, it's it's you've got to have a critical mass of of people who speak your language and, and who get you in, in or because you can feel

like. In other you know, you're not an insider. You're not a political animal. You're not you're not connected in those ways. And so, you know, you don't even bother. You don't even think about it, let alone pursue it and try and be effective. So you, you know, where were my when you put you on the spot question where they're going. I'm sure you did is so what can we what and we've hinted at this. What can we do better and what can we do more of. How can we even you know, it seems as simple as as, you know, speaking about it to promote interest. I mean, just talking about it. Yeah. To demystify it a bit. So what can we do better?

**Erica** [00:43:08] Yeah, I like you. Yeah. I like how you say demystify, right. Yeah. Demystify. Kind of like debunk the myths that exist out there. And so this the study that I did. Right. This is now. Five years ago. And certainly, you know, mine was one of few that I've really, connected with and explicitly spoken with elected social workers. Right. I think, I think. Now, you know, in, in even in the last, these last five years, I think this kind of political, social work social worker is getting more involved in just policy, but also in elected office. I think, because of things that have happened right at the federal level, but all levels, in the last several years and the election that we're facing come November and, you know, so I think, so I think that's helping. And again, yeah, I think you're right. It's just another area as as we talk more about it and as people learn more, then we'll start to be able to take, take action. So in terms of what, what can we do? I want to highlight when you talked about, you know, how are we preparing specifically people to, to run and win, you know, not I mean to mine all again. Right. There's so many social work programs across the country that was, you know, it's. You know, I always think about all of the other studies that could be done, like stemming from this in terms of, like, content and what folks are teaching. You know, we can look at a course, you know, a policy or a course syllabus. But you are, I know, right. There's also things that we're talking about in class that don't show up there. So that's a whole nother. I, I'm digressing a bit, but, okay. The, the University of Yukon, the NCA Humphrey's, political social work, huge there they do, campaign school for social workers.

**Peter** [00:45:14] Yeah. Yeah. Go on.

**Erica** [00:45:16] I have not participated it in my, you know, myself. And I guess I, should state this. I've never run for political office. Elected office. At this point, maybe sometime in the future, I think for myself, I'm kind of, you know, in my career, I haven't been, I, I think it's important to be part of the community or the place that you're representing. Right? You know, you've got to know that. And, and so, so maybe that will come some day for me. So I think that's something important to consider. But, the campaign school, I would I would love to do that. At some point. So they, you know, it's kind of this intense how you, run as an elected official. So that's, you know, that's something that's awesome. Again, just highlighting programs like that, I try and in my course content when I talk about social work and elected office, you know, here are some things that are happening. Check it out. University of Michigan offers a political social work certificate.

**Peter** [00:46:22] Okay. I didn't know that. All right.

**Erica** [00:46:24] Yeah, yeah. University of Houston. Susan Parker. Suzanne Pritzker, who is faculty there? I actually met her several years ago, when I was presenting on this study, because she's done a lot of work, in political, social work. But they have she had their I think it's called their Austin Legislative Internship program. So it's only for, you know, social work students at, University of Houston, but they essentially are doing their internships in the Texas Legislature. So that's pretty awesome.

**Peter** [00:47:00] Yeah. Yeah, I know that we have here here at UB, we have a couple students placed at, kind of political offices. I'm not exactly sure the level, but I really do. I only know about Connecticut's. I think Connecticut's thing, that's not the way to call it is I think it has institute status. So I think it's, you know, it's kind of like a there's resources dedicated to it. It's not like baked into the curriculum, but in my understanding is that it's very practical. Yeah. Like we were talking earlier about how to campaign, you know, hand over hand 101, how to ask people for money. That is a model that I think could be really copied and, and, and proliferated, I think in a lot of different places.

**Erica** [00:47:50] Yeah I, I would agree and you know, so yeah finding ways to kind of infuse that into curriculum. Right. Like consistent curriculum, finding ways to, you know, in terms of making that more accessible to, you know, and I know that they do certainly there in Connecticut, they hold it. But I know that, occasionally I think they they hold that campaign school in different places across the country, or at least in, in the past, you know, so I think that's something, in my I'm going to, here I'm going to brag a little bit about one of the classes I teach that we have right away. It's our pro seminars in social welfare policy and programs, I think is the official name. I probably will mess that up. I just know it by the course number and that it's my favorite class each, but it's, we have two policy courses in our MSW sequence, and this is the second they take it, you know, as they're at the end of their program. And essentially, they group up and create and then carry out an advocacy campaign on a social issue that they are passionate about. And so, you know, there are that looks a little different than running for elected office, but I think there's a lot of overlap. So that's really, helpful. And in that process, not all of them because they have options to kind of, pull and choose from the different types of advocacy. But a lot of them will do kind of that. We call it the Capital League, right? Engaging with folks. I had a group of students last year that, one of our, local representatives here. They reached out to him and he was like, I want to work with you on, you know, like drafting policy. I don't know if anything has come of that, but that's pretty cool, right? A group of students that get asked, like because of their expertise and what they have brought to an elected official, or for them to say, hey, like, I want to, I need you, I want you to help me draft this legislation.

**Peter** [00:50:01] Yeah. And and all of the things will both of the things that you're talking about right now seem to me like just natural and really useful bridges to an inevitable goal of being that person. Yeah. In the room. Yeah.

**Erica** [00:50:16] Yeah. And I think it's also, again, I you know, I think I said it earlier that, you know, policy, which I know there's a lot of pieces to, to that, but policy broadly. Right, I think is, is a huge foundation in creating that excitement or interest then and, and then pursuing elected office. And so I again I it's my jam. I tell my students that, and I, you know, I had a couple of really nice. I just taught that, spring quarter were on on quarter. So they've got to do this advocacy project in ten weeks, which is crazy. But they do fantastic work and, and, you know, achieve what they're able to achieve. And, you know, one of the, the students in their, reflection paper, they write a reflection paper about the project. And it just noted that, you know, now I'm thinking about a career in public policy, and I hadn't been before. And like your teaching of it is, it it's contagious. Right. And so for me, that was like the hugest compliment, right? Like, if I'm you because I am genuinely excited about it. And so I think and how we as educators. Right. If you're in the classroom, we know we know that. You know, to me, the unfortunate reality. Right. Because again, I'm I'm biased that that policy is so fantastic. That that it in general social work students don't care for or gravitate toward policy. Right. And so how we know that and work with that. Right. So I think that's a huge piece and how we just even teach policy. And then again,

when we're teaching policy, these are all of the areas, right? Certainly organizational and programmatic policy. But also, hey, you can you know, you can be writing and passing and voting on laws as an elected official.

**Peter** [00:52:18] Yeah. I want to throw you some kind of excitement or hopeful vibes here. I, I have no doubt I don't you know, I haven't studied this per se, but I have a very strong anecdotally, observation that I, that some of my colleagues here would agree that at our school, I would say in the last ten years we are getting more and more people, students who are walking in. Wanting to chase macro level social not necessarily political office yet, but there's a shift and I find that really encouraging, which is why I want to capitalize on this and get people as fired up as as you are. Let's see.

**Erica** [00:53:03] I think I want to. I want to add Peter in the classroom. I, you know, because I know where, you know, a majority or a lot of the students are sitting. And so, you know, I don't want to, like, put like, you have to do policy or you have to I always tell my, you don't have to love it. Right. My hope by the end of the quarter is that you learn something and that even if you never go into a, you know, elected office or let alone kind of, where you're really doing policy, you know, knee deep policy work in action. So I always, you know, even paint the picture of, like, even if you're a therapist sitting one on one on one with a client in this office that you've got insurance policy, right? All of this. And as a way to, kind of help them connect the dots. And I think we have to keep, yeah, capitalizing and on that and keep at.

**Peter** [00:53:54] That great metaphor. Connect the dots. How how to turn these passions and, kind of interests into action. And in the most practical way. I mean, when I think about power, I think about influence. Power doesn't have to be a bad thing, right? I can be, I can be, but it doesn't have to be.

**Erica** [00:54:17] And I seem to be going off of that. You know, when we talk about politicians, right, people get a kind of icky taste in their mouth, because of, I think, you know, the, the landscape. And so, you know, we as social workers certainly can be politicians without that dirty taste in our mouth. Right? And I see this because the, the folks in my study, all but one. Refer to themselves at any point in our conversation as a politician. They talked about being a public servant. And that first and foremost they identify themselves as a social worker. And so I'm.

**Peter** [00:55:02] Sorry. Say that last part again.

**Erica** [00:55:04] That first and foremost they identify themselves as a social worker. Right. When they were campaigning.

**Peter** [00:55:09] When they did they did do that.

**Erica** [00:55:11] Oh I am a social worker. And I also happened to hold elected office where I'm a social worker, you know, and a state senator. But it was this social work identity and they think you know, they also said that I think that's critically important, important for those of us in office to articulate as another way to, for people listening. Oh, there is social worker and they're in elected office. Right. Again, creating that knowledge of we are in these spaces. And I think that's, you know, even more critically important for for people of color, right. In getting into elected office, you know, folks in the communities, seeking services want practitioners that, that, that look like them, that have, you know, walked their walk. And I think in elected office it is it is no different. So certainly social workers needed

everywhere in all spaces. But, you know, really, important is even, you know, social workers of color in elected office.

**Peter** [00:56:19] You know, that was one of the things I'm glad that you went there, because that was one of the things I was going to ask you about. And and let me just tell you how I was probably going to phrase it is, is do you think and you said that you haven't run campaigns, but you've thought about this a lot more than most of us. Do you think that social workers should emphasize their. Their social work status. Their skill set, and their identification as a social worker up front in campaigns. It sounds like you were saying yes, but I wonder about that because, I mean, I don't know, maybe maybe I'm wrong. I actually hope I'm wrong, but I think there's still a lot of folks out there who think social workers hand out welfare checks and take people's kids away. And I wonder. I think you always have to know your audience as a as a. Campaigner? Yes, but I wonder if that's always the best way forward. I mean, I don't expect you to have an answer, but it would. You have thoughts on this chat?

**Erica** [00:57:37] And yeah, I think a really important question. And again, thinking about the, you know, the the study specifically. You know, I didn't ask around that like, oh, okay. Well do you think this is the best way to go about things. More so like do you talk about your social work status? And they all felt very strongly and and did. So I guess there wasn't any I don't get any data on, you know, the, the counter argument of that or if there is one, you know, my first, I yeah, I get where, you know, your, you know, how you're thinking about it. And certainly when we talk about campaigns and advocacy. That's right. That's part of knowing your audience and kind of tailoring your message. But. I, you know, I guess I think, yes, up front, I think the more again for, the notoriety of social work. Yes. I agree that, you know, there are some folks still that there is a stigma, or a lot of folks. I think. Still don't know what social workers actually do.

**Peter** [00:58:46] Yeah I agree. And then they fill in the blanks with things that we wish they'd rather not.

**Erica** [00:58:51] Yes. Yeah. Or I've even had conversations when, you know, in a, you know, when I'm meeting a new resident in my building, like, what do you do? Oh. Social workers. Oh, you know. Great. You know, they're a physician and they work with social workers, and so they kind of get it. Or I've had some folks say. What? What actually do social workers do, right? Like, I know you're out there doing stuff. And so I think, you know. You know, I, I take that as well, let me tell you all of the things. Right. And so I think the opportunities to do that, including, you know, as folks are campaigning to kind of. Yeah. Like demystify or maybe debunk. Right. Debunk that that this is all that social workers do. Right? Or that we're bleeding heart liberals. Right. That's another thing that I guess right there, another label.

**Peter** [00:59:48] That's what I was alluding to in some ways to that.

**Erica** [00:59:50] Yeah.

**Peter** [00:59:51] And there's this it's almost a stigma. It really is for some. That's right. I think you kind of got I think if I was going to run, I would really have to think about where I'm running. What my senses of how people perceive this. And obviously you've got to talk to people. That's where all those great skills that you are talking about come into play. But you got to know your audience. That's part of messaging, if you will, as a political animal.

**Erica** [01:00:18] Certainly. Yeah. Yeah, I yeah, I would, I would agree. And so I think maybe that's also You know, earlier, you know, you mentioned. But we might get to, thinking about, the, the realities that if social workers are going to run for elected office. Right. Yeah.

**Peter** [01:00:42] What? Well.

**Erica** [01:00:43] I think that's this is good to think about that. Right. Like, in terms of how are you going to message and, and, talk about being a social worker or, or, or how that looks. So I think that's.

**Peter** [01:00:56] How if I'm sorry, how cool are you going to be with asking people for money? I mean, that's a skill. I find that really tough, and I admire people who can do it and do it well. And I think, you know, you're going to have to be to do that. Yeah. To be successful.

**Erica** [01:01:16] Definitely. And another aspect of money, and this is something folks in my study got got at, but I'm thinking about securing office, right. Not a shocker that social workers are, you know, underpaid. So side plug, right? Like, argue and, and and, you know, you are we're worth it. Right? Like, argue for your advocate, for your, your place and your as your role and, you know, your your pay. But as things sit, so when we're thinking about running for elected office versus perhaps people that, you know, have been attorneys are in the business world and have all of these actions with money that is part of the game, right? Money is a big player in the game. And so that is something, you know, that in terms of. Yes. So the skill of asking for money, organizations rallying around helping to raise funds and awareness to someone.

**Peter** [01:02:19] And asking people to help you rather than helping them. Right. Yeah. Interesting. Well, you know, we're we're kind of bumping up our against our time limit here. So I wanted to. Well, I want to give you the last word. If you if you have one. But I before you give the last word, I just want to tell you, because I'm very excited about what you're saying, and I want to share this because it gives me a lot of encouragement as well. I would say probably in the last 7 or 8 years, I've had three former students run for local office here in Western New York. None of them have won. They ran in challenging districts, number one. They probably weren't supposed to win simply because they ran. And and and a Democratic line. But and this is what I find most encouraging. One of them has now run twice, and I just find that incredibly, encouraging and hopeful, and I. And so, you know, my sample is three. I know yours is much larger, but I did want to share that with you and with our audience. It's happening. Yes. Go ahead please.

**Erica** [01:03:35] And I think that's, important to note too. Again, something that that came up with the folks that I talked to. You know, one was she, she'd held was in some other, you know, local office, but then was pursuing, you know, I can't remember now without going back and looking at the raw data. But she was, you know, it was multiple times, and she was hoping to be, you know, elected after her, I think her third run and talked about, you know, because of whether that's money or, you know, your stance as a social worker and being known in the community that sometimes, you know, and oftentimes and just in office in general, it may take more than one go around and that's okay. And to keep, keep at it.

**Peter** [01:04:22] That's the nature of the game. I think if you look at, you know, people who have risen to some of the highest level have lost many times in their life, at any rate. So

now, all right. Thank you for indulging me on my hope tour there. Okay. We are at the end here. Do you is there something that you want to just say is that this is your last opportunity to spread spread the jam.

**Erica** [01:04:45] Okay. Yeah. Well, and I guess, you know, if folks listening or, you know, writing off elected office at this point, keep it right, keep it. Keep this knowledge. Share this knowledge. Another important thing I think we can do if you're not thinking about running yourself, is, you know, identifying folks or encouraging folks, that fellow social workers that you think, you know, have that skill set or have thought about it, right, or that maybe. Yeah, have have started thinking about it, but, you know, haven't haven't made that decision yet or kind of dove into that realm. Support that. And then I guess lastly, I'll say lots of, elections happening right in the next big one in November. Right. But several local ones. I, I just got my ballot book here in Washington for our, August election. But there are, and again, I just have a names of a couple. But supporting social workers, right. If they are the right fit for the office. You know, I also want to say if a social worker is running for office, right, you should be voting on on voting them in office more than just them being a social worker. Because if they're, you know, maybe if they're not running on social work values and ethics, they're not the person for. So think about that. But I know in, Gareth Fennelly, she is a Democratic nominee in, Georgia for the state Senate. That's going to be a pretty, you know, important race. Melody Stewart, who is on the state Supreme Court in Ohio, is, being ran against, by a, Republican Justice rather than them re seeking their seat. They have decided to run against her. So I think, you know, just seeking out, you know, looking into those if you're in those places in Georgia or Ohio, what you're going to be voting on. And just kind of, in general, you know, get out there, support folks, social workers in office if there are folks in your area running. And, you know, at at the least vote, right. Make your make heard.

**Peter** [01:07:08] Vote and contribute. I mean, if you don't have I mean, it's something that I've done. I've been in New York. I live in New York. It's kind of a predictable place. At least it has been historically. So I've been sending money in different places, and, you know, you don't have to send a lot. I mean, Erica, thank you so much, for agreeing to do this and taking the time. It was an. Absolute pleasure to talk with you.

**Erica** [01:07:34] Yes. Always the same. Same to you. Thank you for the invitation. And. Yeah. Any time I get to voice my policy jam and love for policy and and all things political. Is is a fantastic time. So thank you so much.

**Peter** [01:07:54] Thanks again to Erica Pence for joining us today. The members who have been elected and serve on the In Social Work podcast team are our web and tech guru, Steve Sturman, our GA production assistant, Ryan Tropf. Hi, Ryan. (Ryan: Hello). And I'm Peter Sobota. We love putting together the podcast and love when you get back to us with comments on our web page, social media or even email. Yeah, we read them. See you next time everybody.