

**INDIVIDUAL ADVOCACY STRATEGIES AND INDIVIDUAL ADVOCACY  
CASEWORK AT THE REGINA ANTI-POVERTY MINISTRY**

A Practicum Report

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By

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## Abstract

This practicum report is about low income people in Regina, the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry (RAPM), and the journey of the writer to learn about poverty in its true colour. The report partly retells the self-exploration of the writer regarding low income people in Regina, her awareness of the deplorable conditions that low income people in Regina, and possible causes for damages in the lives of low income people. The report looks at the work of RAPM in the three following areas: 1) individual advocacy, 2) public education, and 3) social justice. The staff members at RAPM do not work by themselves to bring change to policies and regulations of the government. They work in collaboration with many community based organizations, non-governmental organizations, government organizations, self-advocates, and researchers to use case advocacy for cause advocacy. RAPM has achieved many successes in the individual advocacy area, public education area, and social justice area. The successes of RAPM have inspired me to be a social work advocate who is determined to bring change to the world around me.

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## **Introduction**

Nelson Mandela stated “like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings” (Making Poverty History, 2010). And the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry (RAPM) has the following motto, “the existence of poverty is shameful – to be poor is not!” However, the reality of having been a poor person and helping clients in poverty has taught me that it is extremely difficult to live in poverty. A consultant of my practicum agency, which is the RAPM, told me that the self-esteem of a person could only get as high as his/her pay check. His comments were somewhat factual and the idea speaks correctly to my situation as well as many situations of clients that I have met during my practicum placement period.

This practicum report is about the work of RAPM and its staff, and my practical working experience during the time at the RAPM. I am dividing this practicum report into eight chapters with eight different themes.

Chapter one is about the clients of RAPM, its staff, and the RAPM itself. My preconceived ideas of the clients, the staff, and the organization will be mentioned at the beginning. My personal enlightenment in regard to RAPM clients, its staff members, and the RAPM will be discussed with a strong evidence support base.

Chapter two discusses theories that I have utilized during my practicum placement at the RAPM to understand my clients, their issues, and possible courses of action to bring about the best solutions for clients. Some of the theories to be discussed are the Sociological Imagination, Critical theory, Client-Centred and Empowerment Perspectives, and Advocacy framework with an emphasis on individual advocacy aspect.

Chapter three discusses the importance of the value and belief system in general and how they manifest in individual advocacy casework at RAPM when the advocates advocate for clients.

Chapter four describes ethical dilemmas that I went through during my time at RAPM and how RAPM staff helped me to resolve the dilemmas. I will also mention the ethical considerations that social worker advocates need to know while advocating for their clients in this chapter.

Chapter five presents different facets of relationships that make social work a distinct profession and social workers successful in the area of individual advocacy casework.

Chapter six lays out strategies that RAPM staff members have utilized to advance RAPM's goals and visions.

Chapter seven lists all the skills, personal traits, attitudes and temperaments that social work advocates should have to make them successful at their work.

Chapter eight is about my vision of being a social worker who works together with other social workers and clients to bring about change to society and to alleviate social inequality and social injustice.

Even though this practicum report discusses the issues that low income people are facing, it is truly about individual advocacy casework, the worker's effort, and the success being won through the years. As long as poverty, homelessness, social inequality, and social injustice are present in Regina, advocacy agencies like RAPM is needed to speak up for people without a voice.

Working at RAPM has given me the opportunity to look more closely at the poverty situation of the Saskatchewan population. Statistics Canada reported 12.1 percent of the

population of Saskatchewan are living under the poverty line. This reported data did not take into account people living on First Nations reserves or in institutions (as cited in Douglas & Gingrich, 2010). According to Douglas and Gingrich (2010), 19.6 percent of children under six years old are living below the poverty line. This percentage puts Saskatchewan at the top of the provinces with early childhood poverty rate. The poverty rate amongst females is higher than the males in this province. Seventy three percent of individuals living below the poverty line are non-Aboriginal (Douglas & Gingrich, 2010).

Poverty has also expressed itself in the form of homelessness in Regina. The most recent released data from *Homelessness in Regina: 2010 Report* (Greenberg, Schiff, Harrison, & Nelson, 2010) summarized the three year trend of emergency housing usage. According to Greenberg et al. (2010, p. 3), “the average number of beds occupied on a daily basis rose between 2008 and 2010 by 44.5 percent” and “among all the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) shelter service providers, the average daily capacity was 92.9 percent regardless of weather conditions during any given month.”

One may argue that nobody would ever fall through the cracks with a strong welfare support system which provides a safety net to residents of Saskatchewan. Let us look at the income assistance rate that Saskatchewan Party Government is offering to people who are deemed to be unemployable and employable. The Saskatchewan Assistance Program (SAP) provides a single employable adult with the benefit of \$555.00 for food, clothing, travel, personal, household items and comfort needs (Ministry of Social Services [MSS], 2011). SAP also provides a shelter allowance with a maximum rate of \$328 for a single employable adult. According to the report of the National Council of Welfare (2010), the welfare income rate in Saskatchewan when measured as a percentage of the after-tax LICOS is 56 percent for single

employable adults, 70 percent for people with disability, 95 percent for lone parent with one child, and 81 percent for couple with two children. According to Statistics Canada (2009), the average monthly food cost in Saskatchewan is roughly \$600.00 (as cited in Canada Immigrant Job Issues, 2011). The average two bedroom rent in Saskatchewan in 2011 was \$ 887.00 (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation [CMHC], 2011). As a result, even though the safety net is available in Saskatchewan, people on assistance are still falling behind with their bills because the amount of money provided by the government does not meet the needs of the people. In addition to the limited provided assistance, the eligibility criteria make it more difficult for people in financial difficult situation to receive assistance (MSS, 2011).

I have seen many poor people in Canada while I have been working at RAPM. I have been busy studying, writing tests and papers at the University of Regina and never really had an opportunity to make a connection between my theoretical world and the real world of many Canadians in Regina prior to my specific practicum placement at RAPM. The reality of low income people in Regina include not having enough food towards the end of the month, struggling with finding a place to rent, having to move around because of not being able to find affordable housing, and having ambivalent relationships with their social workers.

Working at RAPM has exposed me to the reality of Canadian people living in Regina. This working experience also has given me the hope and the courage to share the belief of Tommy Douglas when he said it is “never too late to make a better world” (as cited in Layton, 2008, p. xxxiv). Since poverty is a man-made disaster, poverty can be dealt away with by human effort. My practicum experience at the RAPM will be remembered as one of the most meaningful periods of learning about the vulnerable Canadian population groups in Regina. This

practicum placement has also introduced me to courageous, creative, cheerful and optimistic people who are determined to advocate for low income people in Regina.

## **Chapter One: RAPM, RAPM staff and RAPM Clients**

### **The Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry (RAPM)**

It would be a mistake to represent RAPM without laying out its vision, values, and mission. No one will have a rounded understanding of the work of RAPM without understanding the underlying reasons that makes RAPM what it is today. I would say of RAPM and its staff members are one of a kind and I believe that the beginning of their story started with their Christian faith.

The RAPM is a social justice ministry of the Wascana Presbytery of the United Church of Canada. It is based in Knox-Metropolitan United Church in downtown Regina, Saskatchewan. (RAPM, 2011). The theological rationale of the RAPM is, “rooted in God’s radical love, expressed through compassion and action”, which guides RAPM’s work as it “advocates and educates with and for those seeking social and economic justice” (RAPM, 2011).

RAPM’s main goals include individual advocacy, social justice, and public education. RAPM has been a voice to the low income people of Regina for more than forty years (B. Morton, personal communication, July 12, 2011). RAPM has been helping low income population of Regina not only with individual advocacy but also systemic advocacy in lobbying the government to change its policy to provide more assistance to this specific group of population. RAPM handled 2075 cases in 2010 and have successfully resolved a significant majority of the cases (RAPM, 2011). Lives of thousands of people have been touched through the assistance of RAPM through its individual advocacy casework and systemic advocacy. RAPM and its staff members never give up on systemic advocacy to bring broad changes for the common good of people living in poverty. RAPM also provides workshops on poverty, anti-

poverty resources, and advocacy strategies to people who would like to get involved in helping vulnerable people groups in Regina.

RAPM does not work by itself in the process of advocating for services for its clients and systemic change at the policy level. RAPM devotes its staff's time to working together with the Saskatchewan Conference of the United Church of Canada to bring forward proposals to politicians and political parties to advocate for change in the system. RAPM staff members, at the same time, continue to chair the Regina Anti-Poverty Network, which is a network of over 25 organizations dealing with poverty issues. RAPM has been a voice for low income people and works to promote policies that make Saskatchewan a more human society.

Another aspect of RAPM, that I strongly believe is the key that has made the organization strong, successful and long lasting, is its financial policies. RAPM does not accept government funding exceeding 25 percent of the agency total annual budget. The major sources of RAPM income for the year 2010 were from the United Church Ministry and Services and the Wascana Presbytery (RAPM, 2011). This specific financial policy helps limit the influence of the Government of Saskatchewan on the RAPM's works and strategies. Meanwhile other community-based organizations (CBOs) may face closure threats due to the withdrawal of funding by the government; RAPM certainly is not under the same pressure that many other CBOs are facing.

RAPM is a successful advocacy organization and it is the staff of RAPM that has made RAPM effective and successful for the last twenty years.

## RAPM Clients

Even though I have been trained in the social work education system for the last four years in Canada, my perception of the low income population of Regina was one of the general population. I used to believe that the low income people were lazy and had personal deficiencies.

RAPM clients are diverse. I saw Caucasians, Aboriginal people, able people, people with disabilities, well-educated people, uneducated people, males, females, the young and the old. I had the privilege to be in many network meetings with RAPM in its advocacy work with clients. Many RAPM clients have become advocates for people in the same situation as they were in themselves. I saw people ending up using RAPM's services because they are at the end of the rope. These clients had no alternatives. They did not have anywhere else to go, and they could not speak for themselves because they were set up for failure. As I stated in the introduction part of this practicum report, the income assistance amount for low income people in Regina is normally not sufficient for the needs of the recipients. If some unexpected events happen to people on social assistance, they often end up on the street.

I believe that RAPM clients would not need to use the services provided by RAPM if governmental assistance services were there to lift people out of their pit. I also believe that if the RAPM clients could speak for themselves they would not need to use RAPM's services. I would like to make a case that it is primarily the system's failure that creates the low income population in Regina. My knowledge and real working experience inform me that there is systemic injustice and inequality imposed upon vulnerable groups of population that makes them more vulnerable and marginalized (Hardina, 2002). The following chapter presents theories that have constructed my understanding of low income people in Regina, problems with the Saskatchewan Assistance

Plan (SAP), and a possible course of actions that would better support low income people in Regina.

## **Chapter Two: Background Social Work Theories and Advocacy Theories**

I have chosen a number of theories to explain the social phenomena of the low income population in Regina and effective ways to provide assistance to them. I would like to use the ‘sociological imagination’ of C. Wright Mills (1959) to put the low income population in Regina into the overall Saskatchewan and Canada picture. I will then use the Critical theory to expound on the social problems that low income people are facing in Regina. The Empowerment, Strength and Client-Centred perspectives are tools that I will use to promote confidence, independence, and self-esteem in clients at the RAPM. I will finally present a number of perspectives on advocacy that I have utilized during my practicum placement at the RAPM.

### **Sociological Imagination**

According to Mills, “sociological imagination is an intellectual capacity, an ability or quality of mind – a kind of thinking that is essential if we want to begin to understand ourselves, our behaviour, and the behaviour of others around us, near and far” (as cited in Knuttila, 2005, p. 19). For the sociological imagination to explain the social issues of the low income people in Regina, one needs to ask three questions, adapted from questions written by Mills (1959):

1. What are the structures of the Regina society? Saskatchewan society? And Canadian society? How is my society organized and how does it operate? How is it similar to and different from other societies?
2. Where does my society fit into the broader picture of Canadian history? How does the history of my society influence its current CBOs? And governmental organizations? What are the most important aspects of the current historical epoch? Where does my society seem to be going?

3. How do the Regina social structures and the historical period of which I am a part influence the low income population?

Regina, Saskatchewan is under the influence of federal policies. The Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), established in 1966, was replaced by the Canada Health and Social Transfer, (CHST) in 1996. The federal government paid \$7 billion less into the CHST than what they would have paid through the CAP in the first two years of operation. As a result, the provinces and municipalities have less money invested in healthcare, education, and social services. The CHST was split into the Canada Social Transfer (CST) and the Canada Health Transfer (CHT) in 2004. The CST and CHT are federal block transfers that have been subjected to criticism by various social policy analysts, since the federal government is making education and social services a secondary issue compared to health care expenditures across the country (Hick, 2006).

The comments of the critics of the social policy analysts are applicable to the social policies and social programs in Saskatchewan. As social investment becomes limited, social services and SAP are also limited and are based on a means test (Hick, 2006). The fact is means test was not as strict in the past as what it is today. This means test policy is now applicable to the majority of the social programs provided by CBOs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and governmental organizations. There is evidence in the Saskatchewan Assistance Regulation, the SAP Policy Manual, Transitional Employment Allowance (TEA) Regulation, and TEA Policy Manual. There are many requirements that SAP and TEA applicants must satisfy to be qualified for the programs. Canadians' overall quality of life has not just decreased overnight. The erosion of the welfare state has happened in a process of change in social policies, which has led to the change in social programs for Canadians (Turner & Turner, 2009). A practical example

will be used to illustrate the present situation of SAP regulations and SAP policies being applied, which has made clients sunk further to desperation.

I participated in a provincial appeal for a couple during my practicum placement. The couple's application for SAP was denied and they lost at the local appeal. So, the provincial appeal was their last hope before falling through the cracks. The applicant was having multiple health problems which would require special care and costly medication. Meanwhile, her husband was also facing severe illnesses.

The supervisor and the social worker of the couple from the Income Securities Unit listed the reasons for denying their applications. Then the advocate had an opportunity to represent the couple's situation. The couple had a chance to speak for themselves. The appeal board proceeded in asking the couple questions. Everyone was trying their best to do their job well. The Ministry workers did not want to give money out to people if they did not meet all the requirements as stated in the SAP regulations and SAP policy manual. The appeal board had to make sure that the ministry workers were following the right procedure, accordingly to the SAP regulations and SAP policy manual. The advocate tried to speak for their clients. And the clients were on the losing end since they could not produce enough evidence that would help them secure the SAP.

The reality was the clients did not have any sources of income and they would soon end up on the street having no money for living and medical needs. It does not matter how the workers, the appeal board, and the advocate wanted to help them, their hands were tied because of the means test policy. The ministry workers and the appeal board were there to enforce the regulations and policies of the government. Instead of being there to help, they are there to reinforce the policies and regulations that do not consider the specific situation of the clients. I think that the regulations and policies are a box that is meant to fit everyone into without taking

into account the differences amongst different people from diverse backgrounds and different situations. It appears to be the neo-liberal ideology demonstrated in the residual welfare policy that let people fall through the cracks and put the responsibility of helping the poor into the hands of individuals and family members. These clients may have been supported by the Ministry staff without having going to an appeal if their situations had been presented twenty years ago. Social workers used to have more power to make decisions to assist clients in special situations, where all resources had been exhausted; however, the power to make that type of decision was also taken away from social workers. As a result, these clients are sinking lower in life without being helped by the government.

### **Critical Theory**

The micro level of social work, mezzo level of social work and macro level of social work are interconnected and important to the profession of social work; therefore, I am not downplaying one level and emphasizing the importance of another level of practice. I would like to make the case that it is necessary to help one person at a time. This is the approach that social workers attempt to practice at the micro level of social work. It is also important for social workers to understand the structures of the society in which they are living. In this way it is possible to influence change in the structures and, in turn, see change for many individuals at the micro level of social work practice. Individual advocacy casework is a part of change at the micro level of social work practice. This must occur before social workers see significant changes at the policy level.

The critical theory believes that “domination is created structurally but experienced personally” and “people are not aware that social orders are created historically and might therefore be changed. They assume that inequalities are natural in society” (Payne, 2005, p.241).

If ruling groups and social workers believe that inequalities and injustices are natural in society, the elimination of social inequalities and social injustices will never happen. It is necessary to be aware of the creation of structural oppression in society and the realization that I can work together with other social workers, other professions, and other organizations to eliminate the oppression. It is necessary to ask some basic questions related to the origin of knowledge - where the origin of knowledge comes from and who owns knowledge. Most commonly, knowledge "comes from dominant groups and professional knowledge takes for granted those groups' views of the world" (Payne, 2005, p.243). Discourse, language and narrative should be subjected to analysis since ruling groups can use these elements to oppress low income people to reinforce their influence and power in society. Critical theory suggests that social work practitioners utilize the steps of deconstruction, resistance, challenge, and reconstruction in their practice to fight against oppression.

The critical theory informs me that I need to put on my critical thinking cap while helping low income people in Regina with individual advocacy casework. Many low income people in Regina get into trouble because they do not have enough assistance in terms of financial support, emotional support, psychological support, and social support. I need to look at the system in which my clients and I are living. On the one hand, I need to focus on advocating for individual clients; on the other hand, I need to look at systemic advocacy as a social worker. There is strength in numbers. I will discuss the importance of networking while doing advocacy in the following chapters because it is necessary to have a united voice speaking forth the common concerns of the people of Regina.

I had the privilege of working closely with two wonderful clients of RAPM. They were hardworking, intelligent, and charming. But both of them could not find a job. No company, no

firm wanted to hire them. The reason is that both of them have disabilities and they require special accommodations to be in place so they are able to work effectively. One person used to work and earned a reasonable salary until one day she/he developed a disability. She/he was forced to stop working in spite of trying hard to be the best employee that she/he could be. Another person had never worked since no firm wanted to hire him/her. Both of them have never stopped fighting against the unjust system that excludes people with disabilities because they understand the core concept of the critical theory. They understand that people living with disabilities are living in poverty without a job because of the way the social structure is set up. Unless there are changes at the policy level, people living with disabilities will remain living in poverty with no job.

I have used the Critical Social theory as my foundation for understanding the social issues that low income people in Regina are facing. Peter Gilmer and Bonnie Morton as RAPM staff modelled how to utilize the Client-Centred and Empowerment perspectives to assist clients in their fight against the oppressive and unjust system, and build their self-esteem and better themselves at the same time.

### **Client-Centred and Empowerment Perspectives**

The client-centred perspective is mostly used in direct practice to help clients build their self-esteem. Staff members discussed the listening and probing skills so that I, as an advocate, could find out as many details related to the issues as possible. The client-centred perspective directs me to help clients with their concerns, not with my concerns for them. I also need to have the clients' permission to act on their behalf.

I have seen this client-centred perspective being utilized effectively at work by my supervisor and his co-worker. They often started out by asking the clients about the issues that

they were facing. They then proceeded to ask the areas with which the clients wanted help. They always gave the ownership of right and personal issues back to the clients by politely asking them what and how the clients would like to be assisted. Staff members not only respect the clients' wishes but also educate clients about their rights and options for services. Being empowered and equipped with more knowledge, clients could gain more confidence to make better decisions.

The client-centred perspective and the empowerment perspective are complimentary to one other. According to Freire (1970) and Parsons, Gutierrez, and Cox (1998), empowerment produces powerful effects. This happens when the low income people of Regina are included in the decision making process to change their environmental conditions which cause their social problems. Solomon (1976) and Staples (1990) relate empowerment to the process through which people maintain control over their own lives and communities. Labonte (1990) defines empowerment along three dimensions; that is, 1) the personal level, 2) the intrapersonal level, and 3) the community level. Empowerment at the personal level happens when the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the clients are increased. The process of empowerment at the intrapersonal level occurs through the construction of knowledge and analysis of social problems acquired through shared experience. Empowerment comes at the community level when service resources and social change strategies are developed to help the individuals to be in charge of their environment (Labonte, 1990).

Personally speaking, empowering people sometimes does not mean equipping and teaching them "how to fish" – to earn an income. This is a paradox that I never learned in my education. Some people know "how to fish" through their whole life. They have good work ethics and never want to live on social assistance. But as they become ill and older, not old

enough to receive the Old Age Security benefits and Canada Pension Plan benefits, it becomes impossible for them to get a job and federal assistance. For me, empowerment process means helping people to be aware of their situation in terms of health, age, and employment opportunities so they can make informed decisions that work the best for them. I am not empowering and helpful to a client if I tell him to get a job; meanwhile he is getting older and too sick to work.

I have become aware of this reality as I have worked through my practicum at the RAPM. Most clients have high self-esteem and do not really want to live on welfare; however, sometimes it is the only available option for them. One client was unemployed for a number of years. The client has illnesses that prevent her/him from working full time. The client is also an older person, whose age is close to retirement. However, this client has worked throughout her/his lifetime and it would be a shame for her/him if she/he has to be on welfare. The client was self-employed to earn some small income and living through her/his credit card. This went on to the point where she/he came to an agreement with RAPM staff that the best solution for her/him was to be on assistance so that her/his mental health and physical health could improve. The general population have given a bad reputation to people who are on welfare. Low income people who need to use the welfare service sometimes choose to not do so because of the shame that the common population attach to welfare.

I have learned that the empowerment process is helping clients secure the most assured paths that bring improvement physically, emotionally, socially, economically, and spiritually to their lives. There are also different types of empowerment, such as moral empowerment, social empowerment, economic empowerment, and psychological empowerment. Different clients need

different types of empowerment and sometimes clients need all types of empowerment. Social workers need to be trained so that they can sense the needs of clients and respond accordingly.

According to Payne (2005), empowerment and advocacy go hand in hand as social work practice theories that incorporate “into social work practice aspects of radical and critical theories” (p.297). I learned about social work professionals working as advocates in my first social work class at the university and I am going to write briefly about advocacy theory at work at RAPM.

### **Advocacy in the Human Services**

According to Hepworth and Larsen (1986, p. 569), advocacy is:

The process of working with and/or on behalf of clients (1) to obtain services or resources for clients that would not otherwise be provided, (2) to modify extant policies, procedures, or practice that adversely impact clients, or (3) to promote new legislation or policies that will result in the provision of needed resources or services.

Evans (2005) and Payne (2005) defines advocacy in two parallel areas, which is case advocacy and cause advocacy. Payne (2005) describes cause advocacy as a promotion of social change for groups and their causes, and case advocacy “seeks individuals’ and families’ welfare rights” (p.295).

At RAPM, I saw both case advocacy and cause advocacy being practiced by RAPM staff members at RAPM. According to Peter Gilmer (personal communication, June 7, 2011), advocates have to know the advocacy systems. Advocates need to know who in the hierarchy to contact first. It is also important that advocates do their homework thoroughly before going to an appeal on behalf of the clients. My supervisor told me to get to know the SAP regulation, SAP manual, TEA regulation, and TEA manual inside out since 90 percent of the advocacy cases at the RAPM relate to income assistance (P. Gilmer, personal communication, June 7, 2011). Ezell

(2001) and Gilmer speak about the importance of knowing the right process for different types of advocacy. Knowing the right process of advocacy will help advocates skip avoidable mistakes.

Ezell (2001) discusses a set of advocacy skills and attitudes of advocates. Advocates are: 1) persistence, tenacity, and patience; 2) persuasiveness; 3) compromising; 4) negotiating; 5) dealing with conflict; 6) assertiveness; 7) collaboration; 8) prioritizing; 9) flexibility and agility; and 10) resourcefulness. I think that these skills and attitudes are crucial to the making of a successful advocate.

According to Bonnie Morton (personal communication, July 12, 2011), the majority of the work of RAPM since 1996, when the organization's name was changed from Organizational Transformation to Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry (RAPM), is case advocacy and cause advocacy. Payne (2005) defines case advocacy as a process of seeking individuals' and families' welfare rights. RAPM staff have advocated in thousands of cases for necessary services without which clients would have suffered. RAPM staff have advocated for different types of needs of clients. The needs include personal healthcare needs, such as eye check-ups, glasses prescription, and personal home care. Addressing these needs also involve advocating for income assistance benefits on behalf of clients, and pursuing change at the policy level, such an increase to the provision rate and the provision of bus passes to low income persons at a low cost. I have seen that real change always have the elements of case advocacy and cause advocacy in it.

RAPM staff shared that it is impossible to fight poverty solely at the level of one's local community. Advocacy should be done at the national level at the same time. Morton has been involved with National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO), which is now called Canada Without Poverty (CWP). She has brought local issues and presented them at the national level at CWP. Morton represented the poverty issues of the low income people of Regina not only at the

national level but also before the UN in 2006 (B. Morton, personal communication, July 12, 2011). Gilmer is also active in networking with different organizations. Gilmer chairs the Regina Poverty Network which has 25 organizations working towards solving poverty issues in Regina (RAPM, 2011). RAPM staff also sit on different boards that do research and lobby for change in social policies to have a free poverty Saskatchewan.

RAPM staff members have counselled and advocated for thousands of people to obtain needed services for them. RAPM staff members have not neglected the direct practice aspect of their work and they have worked hard to serve the low income population in Regina. However, the case advocacy work has always been conducted with cause advocacy by the RAPM staff members. RAPM staff members worked successfully with other professionals from different organizations to ask for a raise in SAP allowance of clients, a phone allowance for SAP clients, bus pass at a low cost for clients on welfare. The evidences make me strongly believe in the networking projects with different organizations. RAPM may not have achieved victories for welfare clients if not for a strong networking aspect of these projects.

RAPM staff members are also active players in their own organization, and sit on the Brief Committee of the Saskatchewan Conference, the United Church of Canada. This Brief Committee has sent proposals to ask for change in different policies at the provincial level to both the governing party and the oppositional party annually. Because of the activeness of the RAPM staff members in working for the welfare of the low income people in Regina, they have earned the right to speak to their clients, partner organizations, and politicians.

The combination of practice between micro practice and macro practice is what I strongly advocate. I believe that it is wrong to just emphasize on the macro level practice of social work and neglect the micro level practice of social work. Many people need direct micro practice

social work assistance to see their lives changed; however, services need to be in place so that people who need them can access them readily. If there are not enough or the right social programs for people who need them, direct practice social workers are not able to help the people in need. Their hands are tied. I think that it is important that social workers to put more focus on cause advocacy so that there are funds and services secured for Canadians when they need to access those programs. Social problems cannot be solved just with micro direct practice or macro indirect practice. These two models of practice need to go hand in hand to create significant changes in social policies and social programs for the low income people of Regina.

I think that social workers who practice direct practice can stay there to help clients if they wish to; however, it is necessary that macro level social workers and policy makers should have a taste of direct practice. People, who draft social policies, need to be aware of the reality and needs of low income people of Regina so that the social policies that they design will meet the need of the low income people of Regina, not some other groups' needs. At the same time, micro social work practitioners are to be aware of the systemic inequality in society, which cannot be solved within the realm of direct social work practice. Direct social work practitioners should work in collaboration with indirect social work practitioners to see social change becoming materialized at the policy making level.

### **Chapter Three: Personal Values, Professional Values, Agency Values**

Each person brings his/her own personal values into her/his professional career. Our personal values may override the things that one has been taught in the educational system. The teaching from our parents and up-bringing years are important. From my Christian faith, I have always believed that I have a responsibility to help other people. I have believed in being respectful of all people because I was taught that people all stand as equal before God. I have believed in being honest and doing everything with excellence.

With my own set of personal values, I need to comply with the values of the social work profession, which is the *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a). This *Code of Ethics* prepared by the Canadian Association of Social Workers requires that social workers: 1) respect the inherent dignity and worth of other persons, 2) pursue social justice, 3) provide service to humanity, 4) show integrity in professional practice, 5) maintain confidentiality in professional practice, and 6) show competence in professional practice.

My personal values and professional values work together to serve the low income people in Regina. However, I find it difficult to see this complimentary combination of values working well if I were to work as an income security worker. It is intimidating for clients to go through the intake process with MSS workers to check their eligibility for SAP or TEA in real life. The credibility and integrity of clients are subject to the scrutiny of MSS workers. Clients have to bring bills, bank statements, and papers as proof to the MSS workers. The MSS workers have the right to require more additional information before they approve the clients' eligibility. One of the complaints mentioned in *The Low Income People Anthology* (RAPM, 2010) was that clients of the MSS do not feel well-respected by the MSS staff. Academic training for social

workers in terms of ethical practice and professional values should be close to real life scenarios; however, agencies' regulation and policies can get in the way and make it difficult for social workers to practice their profession.

I had opportunities to provide assistance to the clients of RAPM towards the end of my practicum placement. I found it rewarding when clients called or dropped into the agency and I was able to help and show respect to them. RAPM staff have trained me to side with clients and to look into the structural shortfalls of the welfare system. I have been taught to make the welfare system work for clients, and try to not scrutinize or fix clients because something is wrong with them. I find it rewarding and fulfilling to abide by the professional values of the *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a).

The work of RAPM is really about social justice. I have learned to side with clients and to advocate for their rights. I believe that low income people in Regina should have a safety net available to them when they need to use social services. Gilmer always reminded me that regulations supercede policies; therefore, I always can always refer back to SAP regulations and TEA regulations to advocate for the rights of clients. RAPM has not only utilized the regulations but also *The United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (2007<sup>2</sup>), and *The United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (2007<sup>1</sup>) to advocate for the rights of clients. RAPM staff members have reiterated that change has to happen in all levels of government, not only in Regina. I have learned that social change requires the incorporation of the work of grassroots movements and advocacy on different levels (Lee, 1999). It has been illuminating for me to see an example of this – an organization such as RAPM that assists people at the grassroots level and that also conducts advocacy at the municipal, provincial, federal, and global level. RAPM staff members have been working actively to

advocate and lobby for change in policies and regulations at all levels of government. RAPM staff also represented Canadian CBOs to report to the UN on poverty issues in Canada. It is the work of RAPM staff advocating and lobbying at different levels of the government that has brought about change and new social programs for people who need it the most. I have also gained more courage to side with clients and advocate for change for clients through working with RAPM staff. I have become more hopeful that it is possible to improve the circumstances of low income people. I have seen the social services system through the work of RAPM and RAPM staff.

A RAPM motto is “the existence of poverty is shameful – to be poor is not!” I think that this quotation makes people in general, and clients in particular, feel welcomed and not judged. Everyone from everywhere, every class, and every background is welcomed by RAPM staff, practicum students and volunteers. RAPM staff members model the welcoming of the poor who smell bad and have rugged clothes. They are served with quality service. I can identify with the “service to humanity” values of the RAPM staff.

I used to work with the H’mong minority in the northern part of Vietnam. I have helped them and worked closely with them so their children can obtain a basic education. Under the influence of my faith and upbringing, I desire to treat people with dignity and I have been able to be respectful to Canadian clients as well as Vietnamese citizens. Having the privilege to do my practicum under the supervision of RAPM staff has enhanced and strengthened my personal values to serve vulnerable groups.

Keeping integrity in professional practice is something that I have seen practiced daily at the RAPM. I believe that having integrity in professional practice means adhering not only to the regulations and policies prepared by the Ministry of Social Services, Government of

Saskatchewan, but more importantly to the *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a) and *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN, 1948). RAPM staff, volunteers, and practicum students recorded all of their active clients in an information book. Staff members consult with each other on courses of action that they might take and students consult with supervisor before making any decision regarding to clients' situations. I see that integrity in professional practice is well observed at RAPM by everyone because of the transparency policy of the organization. Nothing is hidden from anyone who works at RAPM; however, it was made clear to practicum students and volunteers that what is spoken at the RAPM office is maintained in confidence.

Confidentiality is one of the most emphasized aspects that were discussed at RAPM. RAPM staff made it clear that information related to clients' cases belongs to RAPM and stays at RAPM. RAPM office also has a box for paper that needs to be shredded. Any email, hard copy mail, printings communicating with any involved persons with names on it had to be put in this box for shredding. RAPM staff would not contact clients' workers or give the workers the clients' phone number without the permission from clients. RAPM staff also kept clients information confidential and never released any information without having written permission from the client. Of course, it is taken into account that it is RAPM staff members' responsibility to report in case of harm possibly happening to the clients or involved vulnerable persons. I have seen RAPM staff conducting their tasks ethically while assisting clients throughout my three months working at RAPM.

RAPM staff always checked with me and another volunteer to see whether or not we had the permission from the client to go ahead to advocate for their rights. Even when RAPM staff had enough information on the clients' issues, staff would not act on behalf of clients until

clients gave the ‘go ahead’ to the staff to conduct the business on their behalf. I see clients being respected by the practice of keeping confidentiality by RAPM staff.

RAPM staff members are also competent in professional practice. They have had about twenty years of practice in the field of advocacy. RAPM has been in existence since 1971 (B. Morton, personal communication, July 12, 2011); therefore, RAPM has established strong networking with other organizations. RAPM staff members are able to readily access support from partner organizations for the needs of their clients. Case advocacy at RAPM does not remain within the agency. Rather, RAPM staff members also focus on networking and obtaining collaboration to advocate and lobby for change whenever they see unjust policies in the government. I have learned much from RAPM staff in the area of networking with the clients. Each situation of each client is unique. Therefore, policies should come from clients because clients are the experts of their own problems. They have the knowledge power of their situation to contribute to the gaps in policies prepared by government officials. I believe that this is one of the reasons that government has tried to incorporate clients in consultation meetings before writing or rewriting policies regarding vulnerable people groups. And RAPM staff members have networked with the low income population in Regina through the years to advocate for change in government policies to help ease the difficulties for this population.

Even though RAPM staff members are not social workers and their majors are in human justice and theology, they completely comply with the values stated in the *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a). RAPM staff always show respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons, they pursue social justice not only for individuals but also for the community of low income people in Regina and Saskatchewan. They provide services to humanity and practice the highest integrity in professional practice. They keep confidentiality in professional practice and are

competent in what they do. My personal values share a number of commonalities with RAPM staff members' working values and the agency's, which has made it easier throughout my practicum. I have been trained to be a social worker for the last four years. I agree with all the values mentioned by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005a). However, adhering to the values in the *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a) is not always easy and simple. My own set of personal values has also caused frustration to me at times. I am going to expound the ethical dilemmas that I have faced during my practicum placement for the Master's Degree in Social Work and how they were resolved in the next section.

## **Chapter Four: Ethical Considerations in Individual Advocacy Casework**

I have seen the reality of individual case advocacy in Regina. I would like to discuss the competency standard of professional practice. I think that being competent in the professional practice is different in the academic context than in reality. At present, RAPM is probably the only agency in town that provides assistance through individual advocacy regarding income assistance. RAPM staff assisted 2075 cases mainly in income assistance in 2010 (RAPM, 2011). Each of the cases is unique and clients' situations are never simple. I found it easy to get emotionally exhausted and have a sense of hopelessness. This was particularly true when I had to witness difficult situations that RAPM staff faced and I would not be able to provide assistance.

I encountered one client with multiple allergies. The client was a low income person; however, she was not sufficiently poor to qualify for the SAP program. She was struggling to make ends meet. She was panicking because she was not able to find a lodging place that was affordable and allergy free. Her 30 percent of income would not be enough to cover rent for a good place that could improve her health and she was not poor enough to be on welfare and apply for rental supplement. The reality of the Regina housing market is the limited vacancy rate for houses and apartments. The current vacancy rate in Regina for apartments is 0.7 percent (CMHC, 2011, p.1). I did not know what to advise the client. I could have advised the client to stop working and live on welfare in order to qualify for the rental supplement. However, I could not do that because it is unethical to do so. In addition, it is unethical to give such advice to the client in that it is not fair to take away from the client the right and pride of working when she is still able to do so. The fact that I was not able to do much to help this specific client with renting a place does not mean that I was not competent. Regulations and policies are set up in a way that

would not catch people when they are falling. Rather, the policies are set up to wait until people fall. I believe that I should aim for cause advocacy to advocate for change in policies in the long term; policies that would give more funding for housing programs, specifically catering to the students, the working poor, and the seniors. I believe that I am able to do more to help more people. I have taken the lesson to heart that being competent in the professional practice does not simply mean understanding and being compliant with rules and regulations set by the government administrations. I believe that being competent in the professional practice means acquiring the understanding of the injustice of the present system and also advocating and lobbying for change in social policies and regulations, which brings change in the macro level for the mass of population.

Another ethical dilemma that I was facing during my practicum at RAPM was related to having integrity in professional practice and keeping confidentiality in professional practice. Value four in the *Code of Ethics* (2005a) states:

As individuals, social workers take care in their actions to not bring the reputation of the profession into disrepute. An essential element of integrity in professional practice is ethical accountability based on this *Code of Ethics*, the IFSW *International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work*, and other relevant provincial/territorial standards and guidelines (p.6).

The dilemma that I was facing while working at RAPM was with the following situation. I knew of a client who was facing mental health problems, but s/he was not sick enough to be qualified for the SAP for people with disabilities. S/he was a high need client. S/he was struggling to have him/her needs met with the income provided by SAP. His/her age also works against her. S/he has had some part time jobs for some extra income; however, it is not much. The amount that the client was making was low and the client still had to struggle to make ends meet. The information that RAPM staff and I had regarding his/her extra income was revealed

during his/her visit to the agency. I am aware of the consequences that s/he would have to face if RAPM staff or I had reported him/her to the MSS workers. S/he would have had his/her income re-evaluated, overpayment assessed. His/her loss of income would be great and I understood that s/he would never be able to repay the MSS if it were the case. Another factor was I would be betraying his/her trust if I reported his/her to the MSS.

One of my personal values is honesty. This personal value goes well with value four, which is maintaining integrity in professional practice, and value five, which is keeping confidentiality in professional practice. However, I was troubled with the illustration that I have just used as an example of ethical dilemma that social workers in different positions are facing daily at work. I never reported the client because of the following reasons: 1) the client was struggling to make his/her ends meet even with the extra income; 2) the information that was released to me was confidential and I am not allowed to reveal to anyone unless I am able to obtain the written informed consent of clients; 3) the release of information to my client's worker will make my relationship with the client and the client's relationship with his/her worker go bad; 4) the release of this information would not help my client have a better life or a better future; 5) the dilemma should be dealt with by RAPM staff since they were also aware of the situation and they have the authority to make that decision; and 6) I did not want to hurt relationship between RAPM and the clients.

I had time to work through the ethical issues and the last three values written in the *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a). The code has to do with having integrity in professional practice, keeping confidentiality in professional practice and having competence in professional practice, due to ethical dilemma in direct practice. However, I was fortunate to work under the supervision of experienced advocates. I had the opportunities to discuss different case situations and be

debriefed at the end of every day while I was working at my practicum placement at RAPM office. I left the practicum with RAPM with priceless lessons, experiences, and most important, intact relationships. The relationships that I observed at the RAPM office are the focus for the next chapter.

## **Chapter Five: The Role of Relationships in Individual Advocacy Casework**

The *Guideline for Ethical Practice* (CASW, 2005b) is comprised of eight sections. They are: 1) ethical responsibilities to clients; 2) ethical responsibilities in professional relationships; 3) ethical responsibilities to colleagues; 4) ethical responsibilities to the workplace; 5) ethical responsibilities in private practice; 6) ethical responsibilities in research; 7) ethical responsibilities to the profession; and 8) ethical responsibilities to society. Social workers have many responsibilities to keep their integrity and professional standard intact. Personally speaking, relationships are probably one of the most important aspects in social work practice. It is the good relationship that RAPM has been able to maintain through the years that makes it what it is today. I am going to present the matrix of relationships at RAPM, which make RAPM a successful advocacy agency as it is at present.

There is a lot that can be said about the relationships at RAPM, and I will start with the monthly staff meeting. RAPM staff are regular customers of one specific restaurant in town where it is not crowded, but is a quiet and nice place for a meeting. RAPM staff exchanged conversations about agency's business, complicated cases, and urgent matters in a relaxing and friendly manner. The breakfast monthly meeting always finished with business being taken care of and tasks assigned. I witnessed an atmosphere of mutual respect and equality between RAPM staff.

The RAPM office is also set up on the open concept basis which means that all doors are opened, all cabinets are accessible by RAPM staff, volunteers, and practicum students. RAPM staff do not hide anything from each other and from students. RAPM staff and practicum students, plus RAPM volunteers can communicate with one another right away when questions

arise. I did not have to wait until the next day to get an answer from my supervisor. I greatly appreciated the open office concept being promoted at RAPM. I was working and learning in an open environment which made me feel welcomed, respected and an equal with my supervisor and the staff at RAPM. I was put in an ideal environment so that I could make the best out of my practicum time at RAPM.

Because of the utilization of the open concept, RAPM welcomes everyone. Clients can drop in the agency from Monday to Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. RAPM staff members have good relationships with clients because they really care about people and people's issues. Individual advocacy casework relationship with clients did not end when RAPM staff members helped clients win the case. There were clients inviting RAPM staff members out for lunch after they finished helping clients many years ago. RAPM staff members also remember the birthdays of clients. I sensed the mutual appreciation between clients and RAPM staff members. They helped clients not only to win their rights but also to assist clients to have better life skills through building friendship with clients to coach clients with life skills in daily living. RAPM staff members have earned the right to speak to clients. Clients always worked in cooperation with RAPM staff members so that they were able to work as a team on individual advocacy cases to achieve the best out of the situation for the clients. Thousands of clients mostly in Regina, Saskatchewan, who have sought support from RAPM staff members, have been assisted through the years. Many of the clients are long term clients of RAPM. This is the evidence of good and respectful working relationships between RAPM staff members and RAPM clients. The clients have kept coming back for years and have introduced their friends to be new clients at RAPM. I remember one person rushing in with a friend telling my supervisor: "you've got to help her. She's in a big trouble". This spontaneous nature of the individual advocacy work at

RAPM has taught me that positive relationships would bring me a long way in helping low income people.

Another point that I would like to mention in the client-worker relationship section is the identifying working attire of RAPM workers. RAPM staff office outfits are snickers, jeans, and T-shirt for the summer. I have never seen my supervisor wearing anything but a T-shirt and jeans to work. RAPM staff has earned much respect and admiration from me for identifying themselves with the poor. RAPM staff members do not look glamorous and they do not set themselves above and apart from the clients. They try in every way to make clients feel at home and not intimidated. As a result, clients share with RAPM staff freely personal and sensitive information about themselves. RAPM staff members do not only observe but also practice the “cultural awareness and sensitivity” according to the *Guideline for Ethical Practice* (CASW, 2005b, p.4).

There are many facets to relationships of RAPM staff members that have made RAPM a successful advocacy agency. It is important that I mention the networking of RAPM. RAPM staff members have tried to network and reach out to different types of individuals and CBOs to advance the work of case advocacy and cause advocacy. RAPM staff members have built good relationships with MSS workers and RAPM staff members are known for their reputation of working for social justice causes. RAPM staff members have built a good name among the professionals over the years. MSS workers pay attention to the causes that RAPM staff members advocate for. According to Lee (1999), networking is an important factor that brings change in policies and consequently, changes in the lives of the mass population. RAPM staff members have maintained good working relationships with the MSS workers and professionals from

different CBOs. This is one of the main reasons for the success in advocacy of RAPM staff members done in collaboration with other professionals from different human service agencies.

My supervisor and his colleague created countless opportunities for me to attend different network meetings so that I would see the role of networking in bringing victory in advocacy and lobbying. I had the opportunity to be in the Disability Income Support Coalition (DISC) meeting with about twenty participating organizations. Because of the networking of DISC, it has been successful in securing the Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability (SAID) for people with disabilities. Besides different CBOs, such as RAPM, Schizophrenia Society of Saskatchewan, and Saskatchewan Association for Community Living; there were self-advocates who are people living with different types of disabilities. DISC members shared the success that they have achieved as a coalition, challenges that they were facing, and proposed solutions for the challenges. Participating organizations took turns to present their concerns and possible solutions related to people living with disabilities. Self-advocates also presented their daily life struggles and ways that their lives can be improved. I was able to sense the mutual respect within the coalition. RAPM staff also had opportunities to contribute their wealth of knowledge in income security, SAP regulations and SAP policies to participating organizations so that the coalition can come up with proposals that bring real changes in lives of people living with disabilities with SAID, which is a totally different program from other income assistance programs in the past in Saskatchewan. Once again, I was seeing the strength for change through networking.

RAPM continues to chair the Regina Anti-Poverty Network (RAPN), which is a network of over 25 organizations dealing with poverty issues. RAPM holds the meeting with the RAPN once a month under the leadership of RAPM staff. RAPM also has an important role to play in the networking of Poverty Free Saskatchewan. RAPM staff has been helping Poverty Free

Saskatchewan network to gather information about strategies for a poverty free Saskatchewan through consultation meetings with RAPM clients. The consultation meeting was conducted monthly to obtain the most current information about hardships that RAPM clients and low income people in Regina are facing. RAPM staff also work in collaboration with academic professionals on research projects to gain quantitative data support for ongoing issues. One of the collaborative research projects that RAPM is being a part of is called "*Mapping Cooperative Power in Saskatchewan*".

RAPM is a social justice ministry under the governance of the Wascana Presbytery of the United Church of Canada. The Wascana Presbytery has recognized the strategic role and location of RAPM in regard to the vulnerable groups of people and low income people in Regina. Therefore, the Wascana Presbytery has been not only an overseeing body of RAPM but also a strong supporter to the work of RAPM and its staff. I had the opportunity to participate in the annual meeting of RAPM staff with the Wascana Presbytery board members. All of the board members are non-paid. They have worked year after year to raise fund for RAPM's work and its clients. The Wascana Presbytery board members work closely with RAPM staff members and have a good understanding of the inequality and injustice nature of the society. I think that the relationship between RAPM and the Wascana Presbytery board members is an example of a well-run organization. RAPM staff members communicate with the Wascana Presbytery board members and the board members are heavily involved in RAPM's activity, goals and visions. The Wascana Presbytery governing board members were working closely with RAPM staff to create an educational event to raise awareness about poverty with the community of Christians, CBOs, NGOs, and people in the academic world at the end of October. The Wascana Presbytery

is not only a governing body of RAPM but also a working body that has extended hands of help to RAPM to make things happen so that goals and visions of RAPM can be materialized.

RAPM staff also work with the Saskatchewan Conference of the United Church of Canada to prepare different proposals for actions to change policies made by the government. RAPM staff members, who are active board members of the Saskatchewan Conference of the United Church, have annually met with politicians to present proposals for changes in policies in pressing issues regarding vulnerable people groups in Saskatchewan. To me, RAPM is a great organization in itself because of its goals, visions and the staff's determination to make things happen. The strength of the organization is strengthened because of the support that RAPM has attained from its mother organization which is the United Church of Canada.

RAPM staff members have worked tirelessly for many years in the field of individual advocacy casework. They have come into contact with most desperate people in society who were in severe hardship. Being asked if they would like to change to work in another agency, RAPM staff made it clear to me that they love the work that they are doing and they will not move to work for another agency until they retire. Therefore, I was much curious about the factors that have kept them going for more than twenty years in the area of individual advocacy casework without getting burned out. Gilmer and Morton revealed to me the secrets of staying healthy emotionally, physically, and spiritually to serve the low income people of Regina. Their secrets for not being burned out are as follows: 1) celebrate small victories; 2) be flexible while dealing with different issues; 3) do not take things personally; 4) be ready to dive into new and big challenges; 5) have a lot of rest; and 6) know how to enjoy life.

I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with RAPM staff. They are down to earth, genuine, helpful and supportive. They have tried to create the best working environment

for me so that I would be able to learn and grow while working at RAPM. Besides the fact that RAPM has built good relationships with clients, individuals, and working partners, it is worth mentioning the agency's strategies that have brought them to where they are today.

## **Chapter Six: Strategies**

RAPM staff have utilized three strategies to advance the causes of the low income people of Regina. They are: 1) individual advocacy; 2) public education; and 3) social justice. Besides the three mentioned strategies, RAPM staff also used different sub strategies within the main strategies to help low income clients in Regina, Saskatchewan.

RAPM staff members have advocated for thousands of low income clients in Regina for their income assistance annually. Most of the individual advocacy casework conducted by RAPM staff is about income assistance related issues as well as housing related issues for clients. RAPM staff members have also seen a rise in the need for advocating for rent supplement for clients due to the low vacancy rate and high rent increases during the last few years in Regina. RAPM staff members have worked with individual advocacy casework to advance cause advocacy which is asking the government to adopt “rent control” in the new legislation.

Public education is another strategy of RAPM to raise awareness in the community and public about poverty issues. The public could get involved with advocacy and lobbying for change in detrimental policies that affect vulnerable groups of the population in Saskatchewan. The main audiences of RAPM are “faith-based communities, educational groups, institutions as well as interested individuals” (RAPM, 2011). I think that public education is a good strategy since people will not be able to make informed choice if they do not have enough current information. People need to be aware of social issues that affect others and ways to improve the situation through action. RAPM staff members provide educational workshops on poverty issues and advocacy strategies, and also offer volunteers opportunities to obtain their advocacy certificate once they finish the training plus 30 hours of advocacy service. RAPM staff are also

working in collaboration with the Wascana Presbytery board members and communities in Regina to hold an Anti-Poverty Educational Event at the Knox-Metropolitan United Church to educate the general population in Regina on poverty issues through poetry, music, art, photos and stories. RAPM staff are also invited to be speakers to faith congregations, youth groups, confirmation classes, schools, and labour unions (RAPM, 2011).

In addition to the direct work of education, RAPM staff members involve themselves in working with communities' groups such as Switch Focus, Study Circle, and the Poverty Free Saskatchewan network to produce resources that are educational to the mass population in Regina about the current poverty and social issues. RAPM staff members are currently busy working with a group of low income women in Regina on a client welfare handbook to provide directions for applying for income assistance. It is expected that the client welfare handbook will be a helpful guide for low income people in Regina and Saskatchewan to obtain needed help. The low income women who are participating in this specific project have been educated on possible causes of poverty and ways that they are able to advocate for their rights. RAPM staff members are also working with the Study Circle, which is a group of low income people, to learn about poverty and possible solutions for the poverty issues. They work together to propose possible needed changes that are helpful to the low income population to the government.

The work of RAPM staff with the Poverty Free Saskatchewan is mainly on research and provincial advocacy and lobbying for change in policies that are affecting economically vulnerable populations in Saskatchewan. Public educational work of RAPM staff also includes providing a practicum placement for students mainly, from the Human Justice program and the Faculty of Social Work. RAPM staff members have helped educate students to see the world in real terms. My knowledge and perception of the poor have been changed radically for good. I

have had pointed out to me the structural shortfalls that have caused cracks in the system for people to fall through. Even when RAPM staff members are working to educate students, one at a time, that one person is forever changed to take side with the low income people to advocate and lobby for change for better policies that will actually help the low income people.

The last main strategy that RAPM staff members have applied to advance the cause of the low income people in Regina and Saskatchewan is social justice. Social justice work for RAPM staff “involves anti-poverty activism and lobbying as well as community consultation and consensus building around key issues. It also includes joint projects and campaigns with community partners” (RAPM, 2011). After working in the field of advocacy for the low income people for more than twenty years, RAPM staff members know at heart that it is impossible to fight poverty just at the local level. RAPM staff shared with me that it is important to know the issues at home and the issues around the world; then devising a strategy to lobby and advocate for change will work better. Therefore, RAPM staff members have worked in collaboration with many different CBOs, NGOs, academics, and interested individuals at the municipal level, provincial level and federal level. One good example is RAPM staff members have been active members of the DISC. As a result, SAID was born with new policies that will be helpful for people living with disabilities. RAPM staff also collaborated with other organizations to get phone allowance to be put into the SAP policy manual for low income people in Saskatchewan. It is also through RAPM’s work with other organizations that a lower price for a bus pass is granted for low income people in Regina. RAPM staff members are also board members of the Saskatchewan Conference of the United Church of Canada. The staff members have been assisting the Saskatchewan Conference in completing different proposals asking for change on important current hot issues and presenting the proposals to Saskatchewan politicians. RAPM

also has its staff represented the voice of the people in Regina at Canada Without Poverty (CWP). RAPM staff has assisted CWP to expose the poverty of the Aboriginal peoples in Canada to the UN by working together with CWP local offices throughout the country to collect pictures of despair living conditions of Aboriginal people. RAPM staff members have worked hard in all levels to educate the mass population on poverty and current social issues caused by policies. RAPM staff also devote their time in the work of direct advocacy and lobbying for change in policies which have helped thousands of people in Saskatchewan obtain a better quality of life.

I find that I strongly believe in the strategies that RAPM has been utilizing to aim for social change. Social change does not just happen top down or bottom up; however, social change will happen when all players are aware of their situations and the potential to bring about changes by their actions, in conjunction with broader social forces. I have pointed out in the above section on the “sociological imagination” that it is important to know one person’s location, the present social structure, and where the present social structure fits in Canadian history. As a person obtains this understanding, the person will know how to work together with other players within the social structure or create another structure to promote change. In this vein Payne (2005, p. 241) states that people should be aware that “social orders are created historically and might therefore be changed”. RAPM staff members have the awareness and understanding of the present structure. That understanding and awareness work in combination with their personal experience of their social location and knowledge of current and past social structure to make them an effective team that works to advocate for change.

## Chapter Seven: Skills of Effective Advocates

### A Calm Heart and a Cool Head

In order to be an effective advocate one needs to have a calm heart and a cool head.

Different writers discussed analytic skill, dealing with conflict skill, negotiating skill and mediating skills; along these lines, I think that it is important to stay calm and cool to be able to think clearly. In my field work I strove to be as aware as possible of my emotions when I was confronting an unjust system while listening to clients' stories. I soon could not think clearly because I was so overwhelmed with my emotions and anger. My supervisor told me that instead of focusing my energy on my anger, I should focus on the issues and best ways that I would be able to assist the clients. This is probably one of the secrets that keep RAPM staff from being burned out.

I think that the strategy of staying calm and cool really works in the advocacy and lobbying environment. I have never participated in a federal appeal or lobbying event; however, I have sensed the heat and tension in a provincial appeal case in which I had an opportunity to participate. I clearly saw that the advocate and the clients would have been at a loss if they had lost their temper. It does not matter if the clients were right or wrong in the matter; losing a cool and calm demeanour will just make it more difficult for the appeal board to be sympathetic with the client. The fact is the appeal board members are also human beings with emotions. Even though they are always striving for fairness and work with their cool head, they are also affected by their emotions brought by the synergy in the appeal meetings. Therefore, it is better not to evoke negative emotions amongst the appeal board members for a better working relationship

and a better chance to work with logic and positive emotional commitment to justice and the best interests of the client.

### **Temperament for Effective Advocates**

Some people may wonder about the traits of effective advocates, since some advocates work more effectively for the benefits of clients than others. LaHaye (1994) discussed four different types of temperaments. They are: 1) Sanguine, 2) Choleric, 3) Melancholy, and 4) Phlegmatic, and sixteen combinations of temperaments. Personally speaking, Choleric and Melancholy are the two idealistic temperaments for effective advocates. Choleric are leader type of people. People with this type of temperament are hot-tempered, but they have a strong determination to lead in solving difficult and challenging issues. As a complimentary to Choleric, Phlegmatic people pay attention to details and they are the perfectionists. Since they are perfectionists, it is easy for them to get depressed when things do not go the way they expect or people do not or cannot follow their detailed instruction. I think that the ideal temperament that makes successful advocates is the combination of Choleric and Phlegmatic. Advocates that possess these two temperaments are detailed people and they do not give up easily. This is important to the work of advocates, since change does not happen overnight. It may take a month, a year, a decade, or a century to see social change happen.

Once social workers attain a level head and a calm heart with the right temperaments to work as advocates, they will need a practical set of skills for advocates which are mediation, negotiation, dealing with conflicts, collaboration, advocating, teaching, raising awareness, persuading, and counselling to make them effective in the field of advocacy and lobbying.

## A Tool Kit for Advocates

Working at RAPM, I have realized that the skills of mediation, negotiation, advocating and dealing with conflicts are extremely important while dealing with conflicts and misunderstandings between the MSS workers and clients. It often takes time, physical effort and emotional effort for clients to be at appeals; therefore, it works the best if advocates are able to mediate the issues between clients and the MSS workers outside of an appeal. Advocates should know SAP regulation, SAP policy manual, TEA regulation, TEA policy manual as well as other social justice issues thoroughly, so that advocates' work is sure, professional and evidence based. The skills of mediation, negotiation, advocating and dealing with conflicts will also assist advocates in keeping good working relationship with both clients and the MSS workers.

It is necessary that advocates possess the skills of teaching, raising awareness, and counselling to be able to assist clients effectively. Clients are unaware of their rights and privileges most of the time. It is also impossible for clients to know what they are entitled to even when they have a chance to study regulations and policy manuals since the language being used in these documents are too complicated for the general population to understand. SAP regulations, SAP policy manual, TEA regulations, and TEA policy manual are bulky, intimidating which will surely create confusion for clients. Therefore, advocates need to be able to teach, raise awareness, and provide counselling to clients so that they are empowered to be more effective in an informed manner. I also believe that clients have potentials to become self-advocates after they are equipped with relevant knowledge and information.

Skill in collaboration is needed when advocates do networking with other organizations to work on different social issues. Collaboration skill is an asset while doing consultation

meetings, group work, study circles, research, lobbying, and advocacy work. It is impossible to see anything done in networking if not for collaboration skill.

Persuasion, collaboration, negotiation, advocating, teaching, and lobbying skills are important in advocacy work for change in policy while working with government officers and politicians. It is best to get the proposals for change approved by government officials; however, in case only parts of the proposals get approved, it is important that advocates negotiate for the best funding, programs and services for their clients.

I believe that social workers who have a cool head, a calm heart, a right combination of temperaments, and a working set of skills will make effective advocates that change the world around them. I want to think that I am there, but I know that I am not there yet. I need to dream and ascertain my vision of who I want to be as a mother, a wife, a social worker, and a contributor to positive social changes. Pulsifer (2007) wrote:

Don't just dream.

Dig for it.

Put your desires into motion not just thought.

Act.

Be bold and courageous.

My next chapter will be my visions and dreams as a social worker, an advocate, and maybe a world changer someday.

## Chapter 8: Visions and Dreams

I have worked in the area of community development work since 2003. I have also worked with different groups of clients, such as low income people, hearing impaired people, orphans, people living with HIV/AIDS, ethnic minority people, sex workers, and people with drug addiction. I have also utilized different strategies, such as group work, community development, and counselling to bring intervention to these groups of clients. I used to cry when I encountered seemingly unbeatable situations until I met a wise social work professor who shared with me that if I would like to see big change for my clients I would need to strive for change at the policy making level.

First and foremost I desire to have a good conscience and a compassionate heart while practicing social work as well as throughout my life because I believe in the equality of every human being before the Creator God. I do not want to be a part of the oppressive system that keeps people where they are. I see myself with the capacity to believe in the strength of people. Everyone would have certain strengths and they would be able to rise above their life challenges if they are given a helping hand. I want to contribute to providing such help to my clients in this way. I want clients who come to me will find some help to assist them to make progress in life. I seriously consider the professional values in the *Code of Ethics* (2005a) as my personal commandments so that I will be able to follow them closely. I want to walk the talk, and I want to see all that I have learned throughout the social work program materialized in my life. And I hope someday to see myself in the position of connecting the direct and indirect practice of social work. I hope to contribute to making policies that uphold human rights and human dignity. I hope that such policy will help train people to fish, not just to be given a fish for the day.

Being a part of something bigger than myself, which is the social work profession, I am looking forward to see many social work colleagues in the area of macro practice. I believe that social workers are specifically trained to create interventions to bring positive change to people's lives. I have seen social workers as enablers, brokers, mediators, negotiators, educators, group facilitator, and public speakers; however, I would like to see more social workers as advocates, initiators, activists, researchers and policy makers. It is important to see social workers practicing their profession in direct practice of social work, but social workers working on the indirect social work area should be emphasized as well. I believe that having social workers working in both direct and indirect practice of social work will make social change for vulnerable groups more possible.

Both my personal vision as a social worker and professional vision of the social work profession aim for social change. Everything that social workers in the profession do should focus on social change for vulnerable groups in society. These groups of clients are vulnerable, do not have an effective voice, face challenges in speaking for themselves. Therefore, social workers should be the voice for the voiceless and the vulnerable groups in society. Low income people in Regina and people living with disabilities in Regina are now in survival mode. There are not enough social programs that uphold these groups of clients' dignity and human rights. Social change only happens when there are enough programs to help people not to fall through cracks, stand on their own feet, and be contributing members of the community.

## Conclusion

I personally believe that social work is social change and if social work does not bring social change it is something else, not social work. I have seen the process of social change happens with one client at a time as well as with thousands of lives at the policy making level during my three months working at RAPM office. I came to work at RAPM office with my own preconceived ideas of the agency, its staff, and its clients. I was eager to learn and to be a part of the change process. As a result, I have been changed for a life time. I saw with my own eyes and had the privilege to work with competent and compassionate staff and clients of RAPM. I have come to realization that many low income people and people with disabilities in Regina are living below the LICO not because of their faults. Nobody with a starting point at minus can get on with life without some types of social programs to help them start with life. RAPM clients have been equipped by RAPM staff to first advocate for themselves, and then advocate for people in the same situation as they are.

I have also been aware of the reality that social work practice “often does not help people to solve their problems, but merely facilitates their adaptation to destructive existential realities” (Gil, 2004, p. v). Many social workers are working and trying to help clients to survive in the context of oppressive policies. Many income security workers, social workers from the MSS have referred their clients to RAPM for the advocacy services since the workers’ hands are tied to the policies and regulations of the agencies. Therefore, social workers become a part of the control structure that oppress and contain the low income people to keep them where they are at, not being able to bring change and liberation to the lives of the low income people. I have learned that it is a challenge for social workers to be a part of the solution to bring change and

transformation to low income people of Regina. However, more interestingly, social workers and the social work profession will miss the game if we do not get on board with advocacy, lobbying for change and taking positions in the policy making level. It does not matter how much knowledge social workers may have in relation to low income people, they will not have enough tools to help the vulnerable groups of clients if they have to keep waiting for the drips of funding from a government whose policies are shaped by neo-liberal ideology.

RAPM staff members have acknowledged the requirements for the process of change for clients; therefore, they have invested their time, energy and funding to empower clients, educate clients and advocate for clients tirelessly with the hope to raise up a group of people who are aware of their rights so that they are able to advocate for their own rights. RAPM advocates working in collaboration with self-advocates, who are RAPM clients and other CBOs' clients, and other advocates to bring several changes in SAP regulations, SAP policies, as well as created SAID for people living with disabilities in Saskatchewan.

Working with RAPM makes me realize that I do not have to be hopeless even when realities of vulnerable groups of people can be overwhelming. Change is possible; however, change cannot just happen at home without expanding my view and knowledge on poverty in the provincial level, federal level and global level. I have learned that there is strength in numbers (Lee, 1999) in real life. RAPM staff have worked with staff from many other organizations and self-advocates to bring about a new program, SAID, as well as many other changes. I still know that I am a single person in the field of human services, but I am also a part of something beautiful, something greater, which is a community of social workers and social advocates who are working tirelessly every day to make this world brighter than yesterday.

My good Canadian friend has read me the following lines:

If I live for self,

I feed my ego,

If I live for others,

I feed my soul.

I believe that I have been called to work as a social worker. I hope that wherever the future will take me, which I do not know, I will always be able to “feed my soul” and be an agent of change to help other people to feed their souls.

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