Internships, Department of Labor Regulations, and Social Work Field Education: Setting the Record Straight

In 2010 the U.S. Department of Labor established regulations regarding internship programs in relation to the Fair Labor Standards Act (http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.pdf). Over the last several months interns at several for-profit companies (Fox Searchlight Pictures, Harper’s Bazaar, Warner Music Group, and Atlantic Records, to name a few) have filed suit for unfair labor practices. A couple of courts have decided that the companies were out of compliance with Department of Labor regulations and needed to pay interns for their work. CSWE is aware that this has raised concern among some social work programs. A number of programs have heard from field site supervisors (or agency human relations personnel) that, based on these cases, they cannot afford to allow social work interns because they would be required by law to pay them.

Field education, as articulated in the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, is clearly within the guidelines of the Department of Labor regulations for an educational internship and does not require payment.

Social work field education meets the following stipulations:

- Field education is associated with an academic program at an accredited institution of higher learning.
- Field education is structured around a classroom or academic experience, with articulated learning objectives/competencies.
- The college or university exercises oversight over the internship program and provides educational credit.
- The field education experience is supervised by social work program personnel; there is an agreement between the program and the field site and a learning contract between the student and the site.

CSWE encourages all field coordinators and program directors to fully understand the Department of Labor fact sheet and share this information liberally with students and field site personnel.