Paid Social Work Internships Part 1 Payment 4 Placements – Matt Dargay, MSW & Arie Davey, LLMSW
Episode 61
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Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

In this episode, I talk with Matt Dargay and Arie Davey, the co-founders of the group Payment 4 Placements, which advocates for social work students to have paid internships. This episode is Part 1 of a two-part series on social work students organizing for paid internships. They started this group as MSW students at the University of Michigan, and there are now chapters across the U.S. We talk about the overall issue of social work students not only being required to complete free internships to graduate, but also having to pay for the internship credits. We discuss the inequities of this unpaid internship system in terms of who gets to be a social worker, the debt of social work students, and how the national accrediting organization, the Council on Social Work Education, released a report stating that the cost of a social work degree is much higher for Black social work students. Arie and Matt present numerous ways to fund paid internships and talk about the organizing they've done at the University of Michigan and at the state level. They helped pass legislation to fund students interning as mental health counselors in schools across the state of Michigan, including funds for student interns in related disciplines, such as mental health counseling and psychology. They share their experiences organizing with the graduate union at the University of Michigan and offer additional strategies for social work students and others who want to address this critical issue. We have to challenge the mentality of "that's just the way it is" and use our social work skills to organize for change. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UH has a phenomenal social work program that offers face-to-face master's and doctorate degrees as well as an online and hybrid MSW. They offer one of the country's only political social work programs and an abolitionist focused learning opportunity. Located in the heart of Houston, the program is guided by their bold vision to achieve racial, social, economic, and political justice, local to global. In the classroom and through research, they are committed to challenging systems and reimagining ways to achieve justice and liberation. Go to www.uh.edu/socialwork to learn more. And now, the interview.

Hey, Arie and Matt, thanks so much for coming on the podcast. I'm super excited to have you both on, and I've been following your work from the beginning with Payment for Placements, exciting work you're doing. I firmly believe true change, especially within social work education needs to come from students because unfortunately, faculty and administrators are too comfortable. So I just want to welcome you both on.

Arie Davey:

Thank you so much for having us. It's truly an honor to be here, and I've heard your podcast in a lot of my classes, so it's all coming full circle.

Matt Dargay:

Yep. I am a first-time caller, long-time fan. So happy to be here, Shimon.

Shimon Cohen:

That's awesome. So let's jump right in by discussing the problem that currently exists within social work education in terms of internships, which anyone who has a social work degree or is in the middle of doing their social work degree knows this problem firsthand. This unpaid internship issue happens within other disciplines as well. But for the sake of this interview and for the work you all are doing, we're going to focus on social work even though it does have ties to other disciplines. So talk to me. What is the issue?

Arie Davey:

Yeah. Well, there's a long history of unpaid internships in the social work field, but what's happening right now and has been the status quo since after World War II essentially, is that both bachelors and master's students in social work in order to graduate, have to do hundreds and hundreds of hours of majority unpaid work for free. For a lot of us, including myself, the requirement to get a master's degree in particular is 900 hours. So that's about 20 hours a week during the school experience. For example, I'm doing therapy with high school students in a public school, and currently, as a lucky person who is paid, I am given a dollar an hour to be a therapist. So we know the vast majority of students don't get paid anything for our internships. At the same time, a lot of students are not really doing very well economically with mental health, physical health, have trouble supporting their families. It ends up just essentially segregating the workforce because students without a lot of financial supports really struggle to actually graduate or enter the social work field in the first place.

Matt Dargay:

We feel that this whole issue of unpaid placements is holding the profession back to a large degree. As Arie was just saying, there are a number of students or aspiring students who simply cannot join the profession of social work because they cannot afford to spend 20 to 24 hours a week in an unpaid placement. So that, we believe, is preventing people from entering the profession who would otherwise make excellent social workers. It's contributing to shortages of social workers across the country, and it's just preventing our profession from being everything that it can be.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, absolutely. So social work–and this podcast, we've explored this many times in different ways on different episodes–but social work, well, a certain kind of social work, White social work really is rooted in this middle-class charity-based kind of model of privileged folks going into so-called underprivileged communities. We know that's not what all social work is. There's a lot of social work that's rooted in a radical tradition. There's social work rooted in Black liberation.

There's Indigenous social work, there's different models, but this White middle-class model where it really requires, or like you said, it's really gatekeeping folks who don't have the financial privilege, because the degree's already super expensive. You got to get a bachelor's degree, you got to get a master's degree, and then these internships, so you're paying for all that. So I just think it's important, and I know like you were just saying this, that we make it really clear of who is then the majority of who gets to be social workers are White, middle class and upper middle class folks, which is why we see, I don't have the exact numbers off the top of my head, but 80 something percent of social workers are White, then going and doing work in communities of color.

Arie Davey:

Yeah. I think that's the fundamental issue with paying money to work. We see this across any field that has unpaid internships as the barrier to entry that of course there's going to be a lot of people who would love to actually do work in their communities but simply cannot enter. Our program has a pretty good amount of financial aid, and even the people in this program are on average going into somewhere between $40,000 and $100,000 of debt, depending on if they're in-state or out of state.

We know that about four out of five students in our program are working a job on top of field and on top of school. We're expected to do about 60 hours of work in school. So when you start thinking about even just having a part-time job on top of that, that could be 80 hours of work a week total, 100 hours. It's ironic that our field says that we should value the dignity and worth of every person, but it feels like we are not valuing ourselves as people and not just machines who can give infinite care.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, that is a really good point. It's like we value the dignity of worth of all people, which first of all, we know that's not true the way a lot of people get treated by social workers, but then it's also, except for ourselves, and especially students, and the other thing about going into that level of debt, people are going into that level of debt then for a social service, a public service job that we know the salaries are also much lower. So when people say, "Well, in nursing, they have this," nurses make a lot more money, or in medicine they might not have always paid ... I think some levels are paid but maybe aren't, but they make so much more money than social workers make.

Matt Dargay:

Right. Totally agreed. To go back to some of the initial points that you were making, Shimon, if we want to look all the way back to the very historical beginnings of the profession of social work, it was in large part the profession that we know, and the little story that we're told about Jane Addams and Hull-House and so on, some of the founders of the profession were the wives of wealthy industrialists, and the foundations of the profession were set then. I feel that the low level of salaries that are afforded to many social workers have built into them this assumption that, "Oh, your partner must be making a lot of money so you, in a feminized role, can afford to make less."

Now, I wouldn't mind personally marrying a wealthy industrialist, but that is my own preference. For those of us who would not be so lucky, we end up working ourselves to death. We end up with burnout, and a lot of us just end up leaving the profession within eight to 10 years of graduating with their MSWs, so it's not sustainable. If we want to actually fulfill the promise of the social work profession, we have to have social workers who are energized and ready and adequately paid to go out and do the difficult work that we do.

Shimon Cohen:

Absolutely. Another thing about these unpaid internships is that students are actually paying to do them because they're paying for the academic credit. Maybe you can just speak a little bit about that.

Arie Davey:

Yeah, I believe we pay, this is a rough guess, but somewhere like $3,000 per credit. Field courses are about three credits or so. It also depends for our university in specific, anything over, what, nine credits is full-time. So after that point, you just pay a set rate for everything. Social work master's students in our program have to do about 18 credits per semester. So it's hard to actually break down how much money we're paying to be in field, but when you consider the amount of money we are not making in

other work we could do to sustain ourselves, not only are we paying money, but we are also losing potential income. We have to pay for healthcare through the school if we want healthcare and don't have another source of healthcare.

Then we pay for gas to go to field as well. It just all adds up to be just almost unlivable through the program. Everyone I know is not doing great. When you think of the purpose of some of these programs is supposedly make connections, network, create a community in the profession itself, I'm not really able to put down roots in a community or go to some of these other lectures and events that the school puts on because I barely have enough time to sleep or cook food or take care of myself as a person. So when you think of the cost financially as well as physically, emotionally, spiritually, it's just too much.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Students who have families that they're supporting, multiple people that they need to support, that they have to have a full-time job while they're in school. Like you said, it's unlivable. I don't know if I ever told you two this, but I was field faculty, internship faculty, for five years. Obviously in that role you see all these problems and maybe this has been your experience with faculty in that position and administrators, and we're going to get into that, but it's very much like, "Well, we just need to explain to the students this is how it is and they need to prepare for it. We know that there's this problem, but are we really trying to do anything?"

There might be some grant money here and there, so there might be some positions that can get some funding, some special projects and stuff, but it's a rampant problem everywhere. This is a national problem. It's not unique to one program. As far as I know, there's yet to be any sort of movement among schools or programs including NASW and CSWE, which are the national organizations that you would hope would do something about this 'cause they're supposed to be there to support social work education and social workers. As far as I know, there's never been any national movement until what you all are doing.

Arie Davey:

Yeah, you wanna speak to that?

Matt Dargay:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, Shimon, you mentioned that there are some faculty or administrators who express maybe different points of view from us when it comes to this issue. In some cases, Arie and I have encountered faculty or administrators or other folks involved in the profession of social work, perhaps field supervisors, who tell us that they support what we are doing in theory or that they're cheering us on, but that they feel that it's hopeless, that the unpaid field work system was the law of the land when they were students and when their supervisors were students and they see no way to break out of the paradigm.

Perhaps we'll get in a little bit later into how Arie and I and other folks involved in P4P across the country have started to chip away at this issue. Now that we've started to chip away, I think now is definitely the time for faculty field supervisors, other folks, to learn about what we've been able to accomplish and to figure out how they can play a role in ending unpaid field work. We're not asking anyone to solve the problem for all people at all times and all places, but we do believe that everyone in the social work profession has a role to play.

Arie Davey:

Yeah. I think that's one of the fundamental questions that we run into is, "Who's responsible for this?" I think a lot of faculty and staff might say, "Well, yeah. This is a problem, but it's not the school's issue," or you might run into people saying, "Well, this is a federal issue," or, "This is a state issue." It's often people will say, "It's not my problem. It's somebody else who's going to solve this," which I think is why this really ties into the labor struggle part of this and how when we think about what kind of a movement this is, it really ties well into the tried and true history of labor activism.

What we really see a lot is very similar arguments against what we are doing to what you might hear different bosses or people who have reasons to keep the status quo the way it is. But obviously what's very ironic is in the social work profession, supposedly we're supposed to be about radical change and especially racial and economic justice. So you just see these really interesting contradictions in people's ideology and what they do, what they avoid doing, and I think maybe also a level of comfort in how things are going if you're not the one who's a student and maybe discomfort with having to actually change what's been the status quo for such a long time.

Shimon Cohen:

All of that, it's– everything you're saying is 100% on point. I want to get into that more in a minute and hear about how you've been organizing around all that. I just wanted to go over one more thing on the scope of this problem before we get into the solutions that you've been working towards. So in 2020 CSWE, the Council on Social Work Education, that's the accrediting body, for folks who don't know, the nationally accrediting body. They released a report that Black social work students pay more and go deeper into debt than White social work students. Just to share some of the numbers from that report, for MSWs, Black, the way they categorize it, Black/African American social workers had debt of $66,000 versus $45,000 for White social workers and $53,000 for Hispanic social workers.

So Hispanic social workers, Latinx social workers, and Black social workers are more in debt than White social workers. Then the mean total debt for all education was $92,000 for Black social workers and $79,000 for Hispanic social workers compared to $57,000 for White social workers. Then they also talk about how the mean starting salary for new MSWs was only $47,000. So we know that these are staggering numbers. I think as we've talked about, there's a number of factors that play into why these numbers exist, already racial and economic inequity that lead to who has more wealth and resources to pay for school and to not have to work while they're in school, or who can get away with an unpaid internship, and who has to take out more loans and go deeper into debt and may have additional expenses supporting family members, things like that too. So I just wanted to go over those numbers and if you have anything you'd like to add about that.

Matt Dargay:

One criticism that Arie and I certainly, as well as other Payment for Placements chapters across the country, have gotten is that we are somehow seeking simply to enrich the disproportionately White, disproportionately coming from wealth demographic that is social work students. So if you want to look at the University of Michigan for instance, the statistics definitely bear out the truth that a disproportionate share of our current students come from a upper middle class or wealthier background. Unsurprisingly, disproportionate number of them are also White. So the argument is that if all we're trying to do is just give stipends to those students, then how are we furthering racial equality?

How are we reducing racial gaps in wealth and earnings? But that criticism doesn't see multiple steps ahead. What we are trying to do is shift the fundamental economic terrain of this profession by empowering future students, future social workers, to have a lifeline of economic support throughout

their time in school. So yes, we believe that our current cohort of students should get paid for their field placements, and we believe that investing in social work students in this way will help to reduce those inequalities and allow students from more disadvantaged backgrounds, allow more Black and Indigenous and Latinx students to join the profession and have stability while they're pursuing the degree. I don't know. Arie, you want to add anything to that?

Arie Davey:

Yeah, I think there's so many issues with that argument. Yes, I think you know that we should absolutely be desegregating this workforce 100%. It's a little bit silly to me the idea that people should not be paid for their work, no matter what their background. I think this also just goes into the truth that this is a predominantly woman-dominated, feminized workforce who's doing a lot of care labor. So I think it's worth asking the question of when we're talking about not paying interns, we're also talking about devaluing care work and devaluing the work that is, for all intents and purposes, meant to prop up the welfare state. We do so many different kinds of social services, and I think the idea of keeping us, as you were saying, on average in this debt that's higher than our income, I think this goes hand-in-hand in part with the privatization of mental health services.

I have a lot of colleagues who are going into a lot of debt and say, "I really don't think I can afford to work in community mental health. I need to go to private practice so I can pay off my debt." I think what really ends up happening is that a lot of students end up working in places that are serving higher income clients and such because that's where people are getting more money. So I think the idea that you can tease out keeping some people paid, some people not, and even the idea that some people's work is not worth paying, I think it just all contributes to basically a misogynistic perspective on the value of what we do.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, I think you're both making excellent points. This argument of this is just enhancing wealth for students who are already privileged is number one, it's a diversion tactic. It's a distancing tactic to not address this issue. Also, this is why the national movement that you're doing is so important because yes, you would hope schools like Michigan where you're at want to increase who can attend Michigan and become a social worker, who gets a degree at Michigan. But there's thousands of other programs like the one I used to work at where, I'm based in Miami, our students were mostly working class, multi-generational households and Black and Latinx. The institution I was at is an HSI, a Hispanic Serving Institution, and students really struggled, students really struggled, and that's just one school. So there's thousands of programs like this across the country that the work you're doing, the end goal, the end result, would be absolutely racial and economic justice for all social workers and future social workers. Let's get into what you all have been doing to address this problem.

Matt Dargay:

Absolutely. So the first thing I think we should acknowledge is that the effort did not start with us. To speak to just the University of Michigan specifically, Arie and I are aware of multiple cohorts of MSW students who came before us and did their best to tackle this issue in a variety of ways. So before we even start accounting for the history of P4P, we have to give thanks to them because they provided a model for how we could move forward. We even had the pleasure of speaking with some of them. One of those folks was a student who graduated in the cohort before Arie and I, who was the School of Social Work's representative in our central student government. They authored a resolution, like a bill,

advocating for the school of social work to create a task force which would study the issue of unpaid field work.

I succeeded this person as the representative in student government, so I felt it was my responsibility to take up this issue and run with it. So I began this effort knowing that I couldn't do it alone. So I sent an email, a famous email that actually is a little over a year old now, to a variety of students who I just thought would be good organizers telling them that one way or another, we are going to get this effort started. So we decided that we didn't just want a task force to be formed, we wanted a task force that would produce actionable results and start implementing a payment plan. We drafted a petition to that end, asking our administrators to create the task force. We started putting together our team. This was all roughly in maybe late November, early December of 2021, and that's really when things started to get going. I think I'll turn to Arie for the next step in the story.

Arie Davey:

Yes. Well, I did see Matt's famous email and it actually came at a very critical time for me. I had just spent some time with some friends and colleagues who all talked about being on government assistance, being afraid they were going to lose their housing, working 40 hours a week on top of school. I went to this gathering and a lot of people were saying, "Well, I don't know the next time I'm going to be able to hang out." I was very angry and fortunately, that kind of anger can be very productive. So when Matt sent out that email, I was like, "Yeah, we need to do this now. I know a lot of people who really need these changes." We started to really put out a timeline for, "What do we expect to happen with this petition? When do we want these changes?" Our goal was to have a payment plan agreed on by May 1st, and our other goal was to have the majority of students sign this petition demanding a task force in a month.

We got a majority in about two weeks, and then we got a super majority in a month, and I think this was very intimidating for our administrators. They ended up responding by saying, "Well, this isn't actually procedurally allowed by the CSWE," which was not actually true. There was a little bit of maybe patting on our heads and saying, "Well, this is a nice idea, but you haven't done your research." So then we did a lot of research, and I think Matt and I talk about what we did in our year at the very start, almost like building a bicycle and what we've handed off to the next students is a fully assembled rocket ship and we're saying, "It's your turn to drive." So I think a lot of what we had to do was create a research-backed foundation for what was going on legally, what was going on with all of our field sites. We also started with several surveys to find out how many students are getting paid.

What are people's financial difficulties. We got a lot of testimonials. I will say I think one of the most important things that we did early on was reaching out to our graduate student union, GEO 3550. They are one of the most powerful and inspiring unions of graduate students in the country, and they were so excited to hear about what we were doing and demanding. So we really worked a lot with GEO, with their parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers. We talked with labor lawyers to really get a 360 idea of what was going on. I would say around that time, we started realizing, "Wow, we've done all this research. The students are really angry. Maybe we should think about more direct actions to put some more pressure on the school itself." That was around March when we ended up having a walkout and a rally in the middle of the school day and disrupted a lot of classes. It was wonderful.

Matt Dargay:

It was wonderful. That rally and walkout occurred on the first day of our meetings with school administrators as part of a formal joint task force. So we felt that that walkout was well timed and it helped to demonstrate to our school administrators that we weren't messing around and that we would

keep pressing the issue until they sat down with us and started actually getting things done. It was, I think, at that point when that task force started being productive. Now we've outgrown the task force. We finished meeting in, I think, June of this year, and we got some things done while working with the administrators.

At this point, I think we moved on to working with GEO, the Graduate Student Union to force the issue at not the School of Social Work level, but at the level of the University of Michigan's administration itself. But to Arie's earlier point, or any students who are listening to this and wondering how you can get started, just know that it is an iterative process that will unfold itself as you go along. We didn't even necessarily plan at first to create surveys or to create a 24-page long proposed payment plan and do the research that went into that. It happened because students raised concerns, even levied criticisms towards us, and we needed to be open to those concerns and respond to them. So if we can do it, so can you.

Arie Davey:

Yes.

Shimon Cohen:

I love that because, so a couple of things. I love all of it, and I really am glad you got into some of the examples of how you built this because I think that's obviously really important. We're going to put links in the show notes and on the podcast website so that students listening, anyone listening can reach out and get involved because there are chapters across the country now. So there's a model that you've built in place, and obviously the details are going to be a little different at every program, but the larger framework will be similar.

One of the ironies of all this, and we touched on it a little bit earlier, is social work is supposed to teach policy advocacy. Social work, it does teach it. There are classes on it, but then it's like, "Oh, this is an issue and we're just going to be hopeless about it." It's like, "No, that's a complete contradiction from everything we're supposed to be about." So you all are really embodying those core values and what we're called to do as social workers. How did you know what to do? How did you know to do a survey? How did you know to work on this payment plan and even how to structure a payment plan and all of that stuff?

Matt Dargay:

Well, I think as the chapter that was first through the wall, so to speak, there were times when, as I said earlier, we needed to be open to feedback from students, even from administrators, from different stakeholders. We learned a lot about this issue as we went, and often, that learning came from unfamiliar places. So we didn't know back in November of 2021 that we were going to do as many surveys as we did, or that our payment plan would look the way it looks now. Rather, it's something that we've come to in dialogue with other students with field sites even, with supportive administrators and faculty. So it's absolutely been a team effort, which I think reflects the fact that solving this issue of unpaid field placements will always be driven by students, but I think it also needs to involve faculty, field sites, governments, and so on.

Arie Davey:

Yeah.

Matt Dargay:

Anything you want to add?

Arie Davey:

Just going off of some of Matt's points, this was not something we started from scratch. There was a history of at least five years of students advocating for payment before us, and we started by actually reaching out to the old organizers and talking to the union. GEO ended up telling us, "You should really collect testimonials because it's really emotionally gripping to people who don't know what's really going on," because ultimately, it's not just about convincing the students, but also, it's about really sharing this wider issue with a wider audience because most people at some point, their lives will be touched by a social worker, at least one, most likely. To understand that the well-being of your healthcare providers, of your helpers generally is going to impact the well-being of society. We also need to set an example of both as a society, how we treat our caretakers, but also as a profession, how we are treating ourselves.

I don't want to be a hypocrite of telling my clients, "How are you taking care of yourself?" when I'm not actually demanding or fighting for my rightful value in my profession. So I would say a lot of this was really yes, talking with people, with stakeholders, with students, getting a lot of different ideas in the mix, trying different things. I will also say something that was really important was our social media campaign. Social media was a huge way that we kept people in the know. It was the way that we connected with you, Shimon. It was a way that we kept all of the students aware of what was going on. It's also the way that we got contact with so many students from so many other programs who are all saying, "I have the same issues and it's horrible and I want to start a chapter."

We do have so many resources if you do want to start. I think it's really important to also note that with activism and with progression, there's no true failure. Every single learning experience you have is going to build towards the future. So even if you worry, "I don't know if I can win this for myself," everything that we do is moving forward and we are trying to build a history and an institutional memory of what we've done because every little thing that we learn does build towards hopefully, abolishing unpaid internships and hopefully, just greater economic and racial justice in social work, but also, just generally in education because we could go into the history, but there's a lot of historical reasons why we are at this point. We don't need to continue with these burdens that we are carrying from the past.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, absolutely. One of the reasons I was so excited to connect with you all when we first did is I had been trying to do some work on this issue and really start in Florida with the NASW Florida and then try to advance that to the national level, because I don't think this should be a student issue. I have seen and been a part of when I was a student, 'cause I was a student at one point and part of organizing where I did my MSW. A lot of times these institutions, they know students are going to graduate, they know graduate students, especially in social work, are going to be gone in a year to two years, depending on what program. So they can ride out a lot of the student organizing until it gets big enough or there's this history that you're establishing so that it keeps going and gets passed on from cohort to cohort. I felt very frustrated trying to do work on this and get it elevated.

Then, when I saw what you all were doing, I was like, "This is incredible," and it is going to take all of us. So I agree, I think it's always going to have to come from students because in this situation, students are the ones who are the most uncomfortable. Social workers who are working, faculty members, administrators, are more comfortable and aren't the ones dealing with the unpaid internships, although there are people who supervise students who are doing their internships and can probably see firsthand

the toll it's taking. Then there's also this issue of, "Well, I had to do it, so you have to do it too," which is no way to structure policy or to just live life as a whole. There's like no evolution there. So let's get down to the economics here, 'cause that's what people always want to know is, "So how are you going to pay for this?" It always comes down to, "How are you going to pay for this?" Students should be paid for their internships, where's the money going to come from?

Matt Dargay:

We as a national organization endorse a multifaceted approach, and we do that because every school context is unique. The research that we've done just shows that there is no one-size-fits-all model that works for all students in all instances. So we've really identified four major sources of funding, which we think a given Payment for Placements chapter should pursue some combination of, and that's up for the students themselves as experts on their own experiences to decide. So let's go through those sources real quick. The first one, the first one that U of M ever pursued and one that we're still currently pursuing is large university endowments. So University of Michigan, for instance, has approximately five-and-a half billion in unrestricted reserves, so that is a whole lot of money.

Shimon Cohen:

You said billion, there's a B.

Matt Dargay:

Yes.

Shimon Cohen:

Billion.

Matt Dargay:

5.5 billion with a B. So if that is enough money to cut roughly a $500 check to every resident of the state of Michigan. So that is a lot of money we're talking about. We believe that U of M is a wealthy enough institution that even if they're planning on using some of those reserves for other sources, other uses, that they can still absolutely afford to set aside some of those monies to create a paid placement program for their social work students. One reason why we're advocating for that is because unlike, say, business students or public policy students who also have to take internships, our profession is not particularly wealthy. We do not profit in our American context from taking care of people. So there's just less money to go around from the sites themselves. So that brings me to a different potential source of funding.

We believe that if a field site wants to pay their students, that they should. If they have extra capacity on their books to provide a stipend to their field students, they should provide it, because if that money isn't being appropriated towards any other use, then that's where it should go. We want field sites to invest in the success of their students. We also know that a lot of field sites themselves are pretty underinvested in, so that is by no means the primary source of funding. We also think that schools of social work should move to create their own alumni donation funds to provide stipends to as many students as they can. At the University of Michigan, for instance, to do in no small part to our P4P organizing, the U of M School of Social Work decided to create what they call the Alumni Field Fund for students who demonstrate the greatest economic needs.

So those monies come from school of Social of Work alumni and are starting, I believe this upcoming semester, going to start being paid out to students who meet the greatest economic need. Then the final major source would be state, municipal, and heck, even federal budgets. In the state of Michigan, for instance, we successfully advocated for the state creating a paid internship program for folks studying to be school social workers specifically. So this was a bill which was signed into law by Governor Whitmer in July. We've very recently found some funding for it. So starting next fiscal year, any student who's training to be a school social worker in the state of Michigan will be eligible for a $10,000-a-year stipend as long as they meet some other stipulations. So we feel like those are really the four main sources overall. You want to add anything, Arie?

Arie Davey:

Well, not just school social workers, but school psychologists and some other people are also benefiting from that. So I think just to continue the idea that our liberation is also tied up in many other people getting a leg up as well. But I do think these are the four sources that we've really identified, but also, I think the sky's the limit. There's a lot of questions about what is possible, and obviously as this issue continues to transform and evolve, it's possible that the landscape of options could also change. But U of M specifically though, and if you have a university with more money than the GDP of half the countries in the world, you might have a right to demand some of that money. I think that's also just something to think about as social workers.

I have a lot of questions of, it's very interesting to me that what like you were saying, Shimon, we're taught policy. We're taught community organizing. We're taught psychology, all these things, social workers know, research, and yet we don't have as strong of a union culture as a lot of other professions. I think this can also tie into the question of I think that maybe something that I've seen is some amount of guilt or even the idea that this is a profession that is charitable and therefore, we shouldn't be asking for the things that we are actually trying to fight for other people.

So I think the other thing to think about is even if people in positions of power, such as the University of Michigan might be saying, "No, we can't do that. We don't have the funds, we can't do this for you." It's always worth asking, "Well, what are you doing with that money instead? Where is it going?"I think that it's very easy to just leave some of these funds in a bank account to just amass more and more wealth over time. But when we're talking about actually paying students, at least at our university level, if we were paying everyone $20 an hour, it would be like, oh, my gosh. I think if it was just rolling out the entire endowment, we could pay students for 200 years before running out of the endowment. So always worth questioning and what people in power are saying and what parts of it might not be said in good faith as well.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, the $10,000 win, I just want to go back to that for a second 'cause everything you're saying, Arie, absolutely, that is a huge win, huge. Like you said, it's not just helping social workers, it's helping school counselors, psychologists, which is another example of why this should be across disciplines organizing together. We know that there's a huge shortage of mental health professionals in schools. There's violence in schools, there's a lot of cops in schools, and so there is money available, so that's a huge win. So huge props on that. As far as the alumni, I think all the areas you're talking about of where to get funding are right on. One thing when I was talking with NASW folks at one point is, so when you do your NASW membership and you pay your dues, there's different funds that you can give a little more to. So there's a political action fund.

There's different ones. I brought this up. I don't think this went anywhere, so I'm saying it again here, maybe someone listening will do something about it. There should be one for practicum, for internships that if I'm renewing my membership, I can donate to this fund administered by NASW and there's funding that goes to students who are doing internships. One thing that did come up with some of those conversations was a lot of the supervisors who supervise students don't get extra compensation for that work either. So that's something there could be a point of unity there to work together also. I just want to really emphasize the federal funding here.

We've got AmeriCorps, we've got models that do exist in, this is a public service. This is people dedicating their life to public service. I know some people are going to go into private practice, and so maybe there needs to be some things where for so many years you got to do this kind of work or whatever, I'm not sure. But the problem with the state part is in states like Michigan, you can get that passed, but in other states it could be much harder. But I don't think it's impossible. I think one time we were talking with the Pay Our Interns folks, and they mentioned even in maybe red states, there is this idea that you should be paid an honest wage for an honest day's work. I don't know how those conversations have come up for you all as you're doing this organizing.

Matt Dargay:

Yeah, let me tell you, Shimon. I think that we were able to partner with NASW of Michigan to get the school social worker internship bill passed by primarily framing it as an economic development issue. Now, do I necessarily need every single social work student to care about economic development? No, I don't. But we knew our audience and we know that state legislators, no matter what state you're in, care about economic development. They all care about having a robust workforce, and they all compete with each other between different states for having a more robust workforce. So the legislators that we partnered with on this issue were conservative Republicans. Of course, these bills sailed unanimously through both chambers of the legislature because these legislators recognize that we are in a mental health workforce shortage, a severe one across the country.

So if Michigan can lessen that shortage compared to other states, then they're going to be at a competitive advantage. So it wasn't necessarily because of full-throated endorsement of all of P4P's ideals that they moved this bill so quickly, but we found an argument that appealed to them. We stuck to it, we hammered to it, and that, I think, was crucial to its being passed. So we have to credit those legislators for that. I think we also have to credit the Michigan NASW as well. We're still trying to get in touch with the National NASW, but there are some chapters across the country, the California NASW, Texas, Michigan, Ohio, that are supporting, if not even fully endorsing, what we have been up to over the last year. So there are definitely some chapters which we've been really grateful for their partnership on this issue.

Arie Davey:

Yeah, thinking about other organizations, the CSWE, I know that they have some interest in the public service loan forgiveness and revamping. For people who might not know, supposedly if you work at a public institution for 10 years and continue making your loan payments, after 10 years, you can get your loans forgiven, but it has a very low success rate. That is a federal issue that could be revamped and adapted and made better. I think that if you want to talk about another way to help students, that's absolutely something to think about is loan forgiveness programs. I know Michigan has one of the best ones in the country too. So there are some of these interesting partnerships when you think about different stakes people have in all these different issues that are touched by the profession of social work.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, it's going to take a lot of people coming together to resolve this. You all have been leading the way in that. How many chapters do you have now, are there across the country?

Matt Dargay:

We have 30.

Shimon Cohen:

30 chapters? That's incredible.

Matt Dargay:

I know. I'm almost sitting here dumbfounded, but we're all affected by this issue in some ways. I don't think we should be surprised now that we've provided the template and not just U of M, but even other P4P chapters have had some pretty impressive successes that this is catching on. Starting next year, Arie and I are going to be formally out of leadership of the movement completely. We'll have handed the reins over to the next generation of leaders, but I'm just fully confident that they'll be able to take it to the next level.

Arie Davey:

This does remind me while U of M is special in that we have a single issue at the moment for P4P, most other chapters are focusing on a lot of other issues too. While payment is still a focal issue as we are named after that issue, a lot of other chapters have many other demands for their administrations or for their states. They can have to do with the actual working conditions at the field placements because when you're not a legal worker, some legal worker protections do not apply to you. So that's also a huge problem that we've run into and can lead to some really horrifying working conditions for some students, again, goes into the question of, is what we do work? Is it education? Are we just learning on the job? Some people are mopping bathrooms.

That does not seem to be exactly about social work. That seems to be something else, but so there are many, many different issues that social work students can unite around. I will also just say that we've seen some beautiful community and self, I would say growth or evolution from this, that I've heard about colleagues who asked and advocated for pay for all the interns at their field sites, people who are starting to realize, "Wait, this is worth paying. My work has value," and actually are able to start advocating for more money. So when we think about not just what we do as a movement, but also, how that ripples out to the workforce and just how we value ourselves and our community. It's just been very inspiring to see that.

Shimon Cohen:

Next episode, I'm doing a part two to this with FED UP, which is a group of students organizing in Texas who are connected with P4P. So we'll get into what they've been doing, and so this is a two part series on this, which I'm really excited about. I do hope this gets more students involved and faculty and administrators too, and community folks who are listening and follow the podcast, who read the transcript. Before we wrap up, I want to make sure that we just go over where things stand right now with your demands and proposals at Michigan, because you talked about the bill to provide $10,000 stipends for school social workers, school psychologists, counselors. What about the endowment fund

and any payment going to social work students in other ways? I know you also talked about the alumni fund for internships, so that's important. That's another big win you got. These are all wins, right?

Arie Davey:

Mm-hmm.

Shimon Cohen:

So just where do the other things stand? I just wanted to recap those two. I know those were two big wins you got. What about where other things are at?

Matt Dargay:

Yeah. I think I can briefly speak to the state level and maybe Arie, do you want to tackle endowment?

Arie Davey:

Yeah.

Matt Dargay:

Cool. So yes, the paid apprenticeship, they call it apprenticeship in the actual statute, program for future school mental health professionals is going to come into effect next fiscal year, so July 1st. That's when folks will be eligible to receive the stipend under that program. There is also an effort alive and well and rejuvenated by Democrats taking control of the state legislature in Michigan for the first time since the 1980s to provide a similar program, but an even larger scale for students who agree to work at a publicly-funded behavioral health agency, community mental health authority for a minimum number of years after graduation. So if that legislation passes, then we would anticipate the percentage of students getting paid for their field placements in the state of Michigan to more than double. So if that goes through, and I am feeling quite positive about it, then we will see the creation of another robust program at the state level to further chip down the number of students who are not getting paid for their field placements.

Arie Davey:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

That's phenomenal. Phenomenal.

Arie Davey:

Yes, Matt is our legislative person. We very much have mutually-beneficial strengths, and I think that's something to think about as organizers is how you arrange your team and how you compliment each other. But I've worked a lot on the union side of things, and that's where the endowment question is right now, is we've had such a strong bond with our graduate student union and they're actually in their contract negotiation year, which will be heating up between January to April predominantly. GEO has really put P4P as one of its central issues that it's really pushing forward. So a lot of P4P right now is both doing that classic labor organizing and trying to unite what is a new class of students. So that's another thing is now there's a new student body really after we graduate very soon and trying to really rile up this student body to be a part of the advocacy between January to April. So in that time, we are really

hopeful that we can all together apply pressure to the administration to better the working conditions of all graduate students.

Across the board, it's pretty horrifying how little graduate students are paid by the university. Payment for Placements, I think, has served to be also just a great example of the power of all of us coming together. Also, I think it can be a rallying call for a lot of the students here to really come together in the union and fight together. So we'll see how that goes. Please do stay tuned to GEO 3550 because something that we've learned through this also is that big attention to these issues nationally does make a huge difference. Often in fighting the power, you need to appeal to image and how things look and also the bottom line. So I think labor organizing really can do that two-prong approach of pressure really bringing to light some of these injustices. Then also, labor organizing can also at its most extreme, have some economic outputs and through labor strikes and things like that if it's impossible to be taken care of.

Shimon Cohen:

I think the organizing you all have done is phenomenal in this approach of state legislation. Then the organizing with the union is a really interesting strategy, and everything you're putting forward too really shows that this wasn't just about looking out for yourselves, this wasn't even just about looking out for social work students. So you went beyond just something that was going to help a few people it into something much bigger. Of course, it's become this national movement. I think it's a great example of strength in numbers and how we do accomplish more together, which are these fundamental strategies, but also, just values that we want to have, for a better world. I want to thank you both for coming on the podcast and taking your time to talk with us. I hope folks will get involved. Like I said, we'll put information in the show notes and on the website, and I want to thank you all for doin' the work.

Matt Dargay:

Thank you very much, Shimon. If I may add one more thing real quick, I almost forgot to mention it. On Monday, April 10th, Payment for Placements is going to be staging a national day of action. So P4P chapters across the country will be rallying in support of our demands, and we'll be making our presence known to local stakeholders and to the media. So if you are a social work student and you'll want to get in on the action, please contact P4P at our Gmail. I'm sure we'll provide that in the show notes and learn about how you can get involved.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, give the address now, though, just so folks who are listening can hear-

Matt Dargay:

Will do. It's-

Shimon Cohen:

... the email address.

Matt Dargay:

... p4p.national@gmail

Shimon Cohen:

Awesome.

Arie Davey:

You can follow us on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, we're everywhere. Keep fighting the good fight. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, we will get there wherever there is together. Thank you, Shimon.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you both so much again.

Matt Dargay:

I appreciate it.

Shimon Cohen:

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