



Making things better than what they were

“I learned early on that you are either part of the problem or part of the solution, and my intent is that I would make education and regulation better than what they were.”

*M. Jenise Comer, MSW,
LCSW, ACSW*

M. Jenise Comer watched her father study to demonstrate continued competence as a postal clerk. She learned the value of hard work from him. Her mother modeled the value of principled decision making. Her grandmother and twin sister emphasized the demand for excellence. These attributes contributed to her personal and professional development. Today, looking back at a 41-year social work career, she considers herself both honored and blessed for the opportunities that she has been afforded. Looking forward to her tenure as president of ASWB, she has much that she wants to help the association accomplish.

Comer says she never regretted her decision to become a social worker. Although she graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology, she knew that she was going on to graduate school. Her advisors gave her good counsel, she says, when they told her the MSW degree would give her greater flexibility and put her in the “upper echelons of the profession,” whereas she would need a doctorate degree to achieve



the same stature in the field of psychology.

She went to University of Kansas for her MSW. She concentrated on an administrative track because she wanted to work for the government. Her second master's practicum was with

the Office of Child Development, responsible for administering all Head Start programs in Region VII, which included Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska.

Upon graduation, however, an upcoming car payment “jolted” Comer into reality, and she accepted a job offer to become the coordinator of the minority adoption program with Catholic Charities in Missouri. From that point on, she says, her professional career has advanced through opportunities that were offered to her or that she was encouraged to apply for, based on others' recognition of her skills and training. This serendipitous approach has been successful, she acknowledges, because she was willing to listen to her mentors' advice coupled with her family values. On the advice of one mentor, Comer became active on the board of directors for the

Niles Home for Children, a residential treatment center in Kansas City, Mo., serving children with emotional difficulties, while she was working at Catholic Charities. Her next job, as deputy director of the center, came as a result of her work on the board and the position becoming available at the home. With a push from her peers, she applied for the job and was selected. She held this position for eight years before another opportunity called, this time in education.

Comer became a field instructor supervising students from the time she earned the MSW. When Central Missouri State University (now University of Central Missouri) asked her to teach a class in the fall of 1985, it was the result of a meeting with the practicum instructor to evaluate a student under her supervision. At the time, Comer recalls that she was serving as a loaned executive with the United Way. She taught one semester as an adjunct professor, and began teaching full time the next semester. She became the first African American full professor at the university in 2000.

In 2009, she became director of the BSW program at the school—applying at the urging of other faculty members. After seven years, she says she is very comfortable in the role and continues to divide her time between teaching and administering the program. She notes that she wrote the self-study for the school’s reaffirmation of accreditation being conducted this fall by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE).

Concurrent with teaching, Comer continued to work part time providing home-based therapy to children and families in the

foster care system for ten years and as a children’s therapist at a residential drug and alcohol treatment center for two and a half years after that. She also provided consulting services for the Missouri Department of Social Services Children’s Division for 25 years. She infused her teaching with the rich experiences from her work, noting: “The kids taught me so much...work gave me wonderful stories to amplify the concepts that I was trying to get across in my teaching.”

Along the way, more opportunities to serve her profession arose, with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Missouri chapter, where she was active on the chapter’s board and elected to attend three delegate assemblies in Washington, D.C., and with the Missouri State Committee for Social Workers.

Comer was first appointed to the Missouri board in 2000. She has been reappointed by three governors and will continue to serve until replaced—something she anticipates happening very soon. While currently a member, she has frequently served as secretary, then president. Because of the number of vacancies on the board, she makes it a point to attend every board meeting; otherwise there would not be a quorum.

The Missouri State Committee for Social Workers, she notes, is still young as a board. The first licenses were issued in 1989. (Comer was grandfathered in 1991 as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.) On the board, Comer served on every task force involved with writing new rules, including requirements for supervision. She identified the need and worked

directly with NASW to draft legislation for multiple categories of licensure in the state, to meet the goal that all social workers be licensed. Comer persuaded her board to preapprove all applications for the exam, as Missouri was one of the last three states to meet the requirement. She also persuaded the board to add the requirement that social workers who apply for a clinical license must hold a current license as a Licensed Masters Social Worker, meaning that the applicant has passed the ASWB masters social work exam prior to sitting for the clinical exam. The change moved taking the clinical exam from immediately after graduating with the MSW degree to after completion of the 3,000 hours of supervision. Tom Reichard, executive director of the Missouri board, Comer, and other board members worked with the state Medicaid office to eliminate the Provisional LCSW license, and to accept the LMSW under clinical supervision for the purpose of billing.

Like many other jurisdictional board members, Comer attended ASWB’s New Board Member Training as her first experience with the association. She was “hungry to learn about regulation and becoming a member of ASWB’s group of leaders.” She was “bitten by the bug” at the 2003 Spring Education Meeting in Buffalo, New York, she says, impressed by the speakers and ASWB leadership.

After her daughter graduated and her son was successfully launched into college, she had time to give to the organization. She was elected to the Nominating Committee in 2003 and served as chair in 2004. She then was appointed to three

1-year terms on the Bylaws and Resolutions Committee, serving as chair for two terms. She was appointed to serve a one-year unexpired term on the ASWB Board of Directors in 2006–2007. She served on the Program and Education Committee in 2009–2010. In 2010, she was elected to the office of secretary for a two-year term and reelected in 2012.

In 2013 and 2014, Comer was proud to serve on the International Technology Task Force and be integral to the development of ASWB’s Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice. Also in 2014, as a member of the Program and Education Committee, she welcomed ASWB to St. Louis for

the Spring Education Meeting. That fall, she was elected as president-elect. She will serve two years as president beginning in November and one year as past president before her leadership role with ASWB concludes.

As she prepares to accept the gavel at the end of the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Delegate Assembly, Comer has been “reflecting on how things have been and how I would like things to be.” She sees one aspect of her responsibility as being focused on “what ASWB does best: providing a legally defensible, reliable, and valid exam.”

She also looks forward to helping the association accomplish its strategic initiative of achieving

license portability and social work practice mobility—something that she has been passionate about her whole career—and to “turn the key on the new headquarters.”

The next three years will be the capstone of a rich and varied career and life of volunteer service. Comer plans to retire from teaching and serving as director of the BSW program at University of Central Missouri in 2016. After completing her service to ASWB, she says that she plans to “do nothing!” in retirement (other than focus on her grandson and family). That may change if she sees another opportunity and is asked to help make things better than they were.