

## **From the Field: MK Sullivan**

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In celebration of National Social Worker Month and Women's History Month, we are featuring a few of the women social workers that support Tulane School of Social Work's Field Education program. Meet MK Sullivan, LMSW, Re-Entry Court Social Worker with The First 72+.

## **After all of these years, why social work?**

Over the last few years, I have worked with individuals at various stages of the criminal justice process-- incarceration, court, supervision, reentry, etc.. Working in this space is traumatic and emotionally taxing no matter your role in the system. There are far more losses than wins. Situations that feel hopeless and impossible. It's being a part of those situations with my clients and their families, offering them kindness, support, and space to grieve, in a system that perpetuates human suffering. There has been no greater privilege than to be with people through some of the hardest moments in their lives, and to be trusted with their vulnerability in those spaces. Social work has provided me the opportunity to meet people I never would have met any other way-- beautiful, kind-hearted people, who despite adversity, remain hopeful. My clients have taught me more than I ever learned in school, and remind me of the importance of human connection. All of my experiences and the challenges I have encountered in this field push me to continuously reflect on my values, beliefs, and assumptions.

## **Why restorative justice?**

Social work is unique in that we view our clients through a person-in-environment perspective to better understand the environmental contexts of their life. Social workers recognize the humanity of our clients, and the interconnections among their needs. We see how their choices, or lack of choices, brought them to this point. Formerly or currently incarcerated persons are not their crime. If we have learned anything in recent times, it is that people are wrongfully convicted, sentenced excessively, over-detained, and punished for being poor, mentally ill, or disabled every day. The one-size fits all approach does not work. Understanding the complex histories of individuals involved in the system is crucial to providing appropriate interventions and services to address underlying needs. Social workers are able to provide context to prosecutors, law enforcement, and the Courts to advocate on behalf of clients, propose alternatives to incarceration, and provide necessary

resources for clients to stabilize and mend relationships; thereby mitigating any effects of the criminal justice system on the individual and their families.

## **Why did you choose social work for your profession?**

After graduating college, I began working at an agency that provided case management, counseling, and other social services. I was drawn to the versatility of areas of practice ranging from micro to macro, and the different opportunities. There was one social worker at the agency, and she graciously let me shadow her for years. She became my mentor and fueled the fire that led me down the social work path.

## **Who is a social work professional that you look up to in the field?**

I have met many incredible social workers since entering the social work profession, all of whom have shaped and influenced me into the social worker I am today. I am not sure I could choose just one person that I look up to in the field. When I reflect on my social work experience, I think of my clinical supervisor who taught me about boundaries, self-advocacy, and wonder. I think about my field supervisor while I was at TSSW who taught me the importance of reflection, and challenged me to find acceptance and flexibility while navigating the gray areas. Although not in the spotlight, these women have made a lasting impression on my life, and my social work practice.