

OASSSA

ORGANISATION FOR APPROPRIATE SOCIAL SERVICES IN SOUTH AFRICA

OASSSA is a national organisation for progressive mental health and social service workers. It is an organisation committed to a free, unitary, non-racial and democratic South Africa. It recognises the link between politics and mental health, and recognises the devastating effects that apartheid has on mental health. OASSSA's work highlights these effects and tries to assist victims of apartheid as well as developing new and more appropriate models of mental health care. This article will concentrate on work and activities in the Transvaal.



History of OASSSA

In 1983 an international conference on family therapy was held at Sun City. A group of progressive psychologists saw the contradiction of a conference on family therapy in a so-called "independent homeland" which contributed to the breakdown of family life. These psychologists organised themselves into a group to protest against the conference and to highlight the plight of families in South Africa, particularly those affected by migrant labour and by the apartheid system in general. They also organised an alternative workshop entitled "Families in South Africa". This workshop explored those factors which disrupt family life in South Africa. It was the start towards finding more appropriate roles for helping professionals in South Africa.

The group which originally began as a protest against a conference, gradually developed into an organisation of progressive people concerned with mental health and social service issues. Existing mental health or social service organisations were not dealing with those issues pertinent to South Africa in the early 1980's and OASSSA was formed to fill that gap.

OASSSA started in the Transvaal in 1983. Branches were formed in the Western Cape, in Durban and in Pietermaritzburg in 1985, 1986 and 1987 respectively. Presently there are possibilities of branches forming in other areas.

Aims and objectives

OASSSA is committed to the mental health and social welfare of South Africa's people and to the development of appropriate social services. We are aware that in South Africa there are specific economic and political structures which contribute to most social and personal problems. Apartheid and economic exploitation provide the base for poor living conditions, work alienation and race and sex discrimination which are harmful to mental health. Our commitment as social service workers demands that we continually expose the effects of these conditions and participate in efforts to change the structures that underlie them. We are committed to working together with other democratic organisations which are involved in the same or similar efforts.

We need to identify and overcome the limitations which restrict our efforts. These include restrictive and unjust legislation, the isolation of the various mental health disciplines and the control of skills by a professional elite. In order properly to serve our community, we must work for a broad and unified discipline, for the sharing of knowledge and skills with the community at large and, ultimately, for an economically just and democratic society.



Progressive psychologists objected to a family therapy conference which was held at Sun City, Bophuthatswana in 1983. They felt the homeland system disrupted family life.

We therefore aim to:

- unite social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and other social service workers who are interested in working towards appropriate social services in South Africa;
- examine and research the causes of social and personal problems as extensively and as rigorously as possible;
- service and aid progressive organisations;
- reduce disciplinary isolation and define and work towards a unified discipline of social service;
- provide a forum for the discussion of existing social services and protest actively against these where they are inappropriate;
- share our knowledge and skills as widely as possible through workshops, conferences, publications, the establishment of a resource centre and involvement in the community;
- develop models of appropriate social service and assist wherever possible with their implementation.

(These aims and objectives are quoted from the OASSSA Statement of Principles.)

Structure of OASSSA

OASSSA is a national organisation presently comprised of four branches. A national executive consisting of two elected representatives from each branch meets four times a year to discuss national policy, finance and other relevant issues. Decisions are ratified at national meetings.

Each branch has an executive which is elected at the annual general meeting. The monthly general meeting for all members is the decision-making body in the organisation, and provides the forum where issues can be debated and decisions made in a democratic way.

Decisions made at executive level are ratified at general meetings. There is branch autonomy to decide what work should be undertaken at a local level, but issues of national concern are discussed at national level.

Activities and campaigns

OASSSA (Tvl) is involved in the following activities and campaigns:

Detainee counselling

OASSSA (Tvl), together with Concerned Social Workers (CSW), NAMDA and other



OASSSA believes that apartheid and economic exploitation is incompatible with mental well-being.

mental health professionals help run the Detainees Counselling Service (DCS). DCS operates on a week-day basis and released detainees are seen and treated by doctors and mental health professionals. Many OASSSA members provide counselling to ex-detainees and assist in teaching study skills.

Research

OASSSA's Research Group is mainly involved in gathering information about the effects of the economic, social and political situation in South Africa on mental health. OASSSA responds to requests for research from unions, community organisations and from its own interest groups. Research that has been undertaken includes an investigation into parental rights which was used in trade union negotiations. The OASSSA Research Group is also providing information on job related stress and investigating the plight of security workers. Khanya College students in Johannesburg have been incorporated into OASSSA research projects to investigate existing social services in the townships.

Training

OASSSA members have always been involved in training people in counselling skills. Members of community organisations, church field workers and advice officers have been trained. The training not only includes imparting counselling skills, but placing mental health in its political context. A counselling training manual has been produced which provides information on counselling techniques and details common and uncommon stress responses and ways of dealing with them.

Media and education

OASSSA's Media and Education Group compiles and distributes information. OASSSA's internal education programme educates its members both politically and in terms of appropriate mental health practices. Annual conferences and occasional educational meetings are held which are open to the broader public.

OASSSA publishes a national newsletter twice a year, in addition to a more frequently appearing local newsletter. These newsletters keep members informed about happenings and meetings within the organisation, as well as current debates and articles.

This group also compiles information for communities, depending on particular needs. Pamphlets have been produced on the adverse effects of apartheid on mental health, on ways of dealing with stress caused by living in such repressive times and understanding and coping with the psychological effects of detention.

The media published by OASSSA is available, on request, from the contact addresses provided at the end of this article.

Campaigns

As part of the progressive movement, OASSSA responds to and participates in current campaigns. Presently, OASSSA (Tvl) is active in Save the Patriots and in the support of the hunger strikers.

Conclusion

As a long term aim, OASSSA is working towards adequate and appropriate mental health care for all people, with control over one's own mental health, as well as appropriate and adequate social services. OASSSA is aware of the numerous health and mental health organisations within the democratic movement and is part of the groupings working towards unity within this sector.



Together with other organisations, OASSSA helps run counselling services for ex-detainees.

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