

Social workers get big payoff

By [Regina Brett, The Plain Dealer](#)

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Sally Social Worker.

I've been called that often for writing "bleeding heart" columns.

After looking into the eyes of a sea of social workers on Sunday, I'll never take that as an insult.

When the folks at The Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University asked me to speak at Sunday's commencement, I wasn't sure what to say.

I asked my friends who are social workers. They told me to be funny. Social workers could use a good laugh. Tell jokes, they said.

Jokes? I don't know any jokes about social work, except the ones my friends send me:

How many social workers does it take to change a light bulb?

None. They empower the bulb to change itself.

How many social workers does it take to change a light bulb?

None. The bulb isn't burned out, it's just differently lit.

How many social workers does it take to change a light bulb?

None. They set up a team to write a paper on coping with darkness.

And my favorite, How many social workers does it take to change a light bulb?

The light bulb doesn't need changing, it's the system that needs to change.

Actually, my friends probably got those jokes from the same Web sites where I found this:

A mugger with a gun confronts a social worker. The mugger yells, "Your money or your life!" "I'm sorry," the social worker answers, "I'm a social worker, so I have no money . . . and no life."

Social workers, like most teachers, don't make much. Or do they?

I recently read a powerful e-mail about what teachers make by the poet and comic Taylor Mali. It inspired me to rethink what social workers make.

What do they make?

They make an infertile couple celebrate a lifetime of Mother's Days and Father's Days by helping them adopt a crack baby no one else wanted.

They make a child fall asleep every night without fear of his father's fists.

They make a homeless veteran feel at home in the world.

They make a teenager decide to stop cutting herself.

They make a beaten woman find the courage to leave her abuser for good.

They make a boy with Down syndrome feel like the smartest kid on the bus.

What do they make?

They make a 10-year-old believe that he is loved and wanted, regardless of how long he lasts in the next foster home.

They make a teen father count to 10 and leave the room so he won't shake his newborn son.

They make a man with schizophrenia see past his demons.

They make a rape victim talk about it for the first time in years.

They make an ex-convict put down the bottle and hold down a job.

What do they make?

They make a couple communicate so well they decide not to get divorced.

They make a dying cancer patient make peace with her past, with her brief future, with her God.

They make the old man whose wife has Alzheimer's cherish the good times, when she still remembered him.

They make forgotten people feel cherished, ugly people feel beautiful, confused people feel understood, broken people feel whole.

What do they make?

They make more than most people will ever make.

They make a difference.