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CHICAGO SISTER CITIES INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SERVICES EXCHANGE PROGRAM

Social Services professionals worldwide are facing similar challenges due to common societal and economic upheavals. Issues such as child welfare, youth delinquency and an increasing elderly population have no national boundaries. The Chicago Sister Cities International (CSCI) Social Services Exchange Program believes that best practices and policies to address social problems should also have no boundaries and that learning from each other's experiences improves the quality of life worldwide. Subsequently, CSCI has developed a Social Services Exchange Model.

The CSCI Social Services Exchange Model:

- Bridges cultural, national, and interdisciplinary boundaries to address common social challenges in our global community.
- Initiates on-going exchanges which immerse social workers and social service professionals in alternating international cities to spark "cultural dialogue" about mutually agreed topics between administrators, supervisors, practitioners, academics, lawyers, and future leaders.
- Develops opportunities for those working closest to social challenges to reexamine their assumptions, professional strategies, and belief systems.
- Cultivates "best practices", enhanced cultural understandings overcoming cultural divisions, increased professional networks, and on-going projects which promote human potential and functioning in participants' home cities and the world.

This exchange model, which to date has been successfully implemented in six sister cities and four continents, addresses both international social welfare and cross-cultural efforts. The exchange is an innovative group experience that offers multidimensional learning through four core elements:

- Learn about the host city's historical/cultural underpinnings including those of their social welfare developments.
- Visit group sites that demonstrate best practices addressing common social challenges.
- Immerse delegates individually into specific areas of expertise/practice.
- Present on the last day the delegates' experience to local professionals with the goal to compare, contrast, and develop new ideas to address common social welfare issues.

Since 1996, over 2000 social service professionals in Chicago and five of its sister cities have participated in these exchanges making sustainable changes such as:

- Redesigning Birmingham, England's Juvenile Offender Program.
- Implementing a Chicago foster care training into Durban, South Africa's Department of social Welfare.
- Incorporating Hamburg's 'harm-reduction' model into Chicago's work with homeless.

Loyola University's Center for Urban Research & Learning evaluated the program saying, "...the participants haven't just 'seen' things, but that they have begun to compare and contrast with their own experiences in their home country. That is, there has been critical reflection – something much needed in social service provision the world over."

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