

Dr. Jesse J. Harris, First African American Dean of the School of Social Work

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The School of Social Work at the University of Maryland opened in 1961, after the integration struggles at the University of Maryland, Baltimore during the 1940s and 1950s. Thus the early classes at the school included African American students. The school, according to the 2011 *Turning Points* publication, started with a commitment to racial equality.



Dr. Jesse J. Harris, dean emeritus of the School of Social Work, photograph from Turning Points, the 2011 history of the School of Social Work.

Dr. Jesse J. Harris graduated from the School of Social Work with a master's degree in 1971 and again with a PhD in 1976. Following graduation he continued his military career in the Army serving as chief of social workers for the Army Surgeon General, consultant to the U.S. Ambassador to Mozambique, and finally as chief of Social Work Services at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. He retired from the Army in June 1990 as the Army's highest ranking social worker.

Following his Army retirement, Dr. Harris joined the faculty of the University of Maryland School of Social Work. He was soon named acting dean and then dean in October 1991. Soon after being named dean, Dr. Harris created the Social Work Community Outreach Service (SWCOS). Through the organization the school supported the local Baltimore community by providing free social work services for residents; in reflecting on the success of the program in the 2008 *Connections* magazine, Harris said it was to be "a symbol of the School in the community." In addition to the benefits for the community, the SWCOS provided social work students with hands-on experience and faculty with a research site. Through the organization

new models of social work practice were developed. It was the first organization of its kind and provided a model for other social work schools to implement similar programs.

In addition to the success of SWCOS, Harris increased research funding for the school. He developed innovative curriculum programs and outreach services, including a study abroad program with Rajagiri College of Social Sciences at Mahatma Gandhi University in Kerala, India. By 2004, the school was ranked number 19 in the US News and World Report rankings—the youngest school to ever achieve ranking within the top 20. Dr. Harris stepped down as Dean in 2006 but remained at the school as a professor until retiring in 2016.

In addition to his MSW and PhD from the University of Maryland, Dr. Harris has a master's degree in psychology from Howard University and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Morgan State University. His research interests are the history of Army social work and the stress experienced by

peace keeping forces. Dr. Harris is an American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare Fellow and has received several awards for his work, including the Benemerenti Medal from the Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore for his social work service.

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