

Employee Appreciation  
40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of HCPS  
Altruism and Protective Services: A Recognition and  
Expression of Gratitude for the Work of Harris County  
Protective Services Workers  
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By  
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I am very honored to speak with you this afternoon. I am honored because I have been selected as a representative of a larger group to deliver this thanks to you. ...and honored that people thought I might do a good enough job.

My speech is intended to express appreciation for your work on behalf of the board, but I take it that when I am doing this I am really expressing appreciation for your work on behalf of our entire community.

For me the work that you do is some of the hardest work that members of a society can do. Regardless of your position in this system, you are part of an effort to offer protection and support for children and adults who have come into harm's way - victims of illness, abuse, neglect – and, typically, in one way or another, victims of poverty. This is hard work not only because of the wretched and heart wrenching circumstances that you must encounter, but also hard because many of us in the community ignore or worse yet, blame these victims for their hardships. By blaming victims we can keep up a fantasy – a fantasy that we our selves or members of our own family could never be in such miserable situations. This is, in my professional opinion, a delusion that afflicts a substantial number of our citizens. It is a sad and dangerous delusion.

So, where do you come in?

I have had debates with colleagues over the years about the concept of altruism. Altruism means, as you know, behavior that benefits others – not just the actor. Many people think that true altruism does not exist, that acts of generosity or compassion are really done only because there will be some pay off for the actor – for example, that the apparently generous act is really performed for the benefit of one's own self-esteem. This may be true in some ways, but I think there is something deeper that moves people like you to help others – something about being part of humanity.

Speaking of good as opposed to bad luck - I recently had the opportunity to visit a museum in Lyon, France that was dedicated to the French resistance against the Nazis after the German invasion and occupation of France in the early part of WWII. One of the many things that touched me about the stories depicted in the museum was the fact that the basis for the resistance in most cases was not simply the protection of personal property - that is the motivation was not just to protect the country from an occupying force, but an opposition to the persecution of others, a minority group – the Jews – and, most importantly, a willingness to die to protect these others – in most cases strangers, from the worst kind of abuse imaginable.

I think your work is an example of this same altruistic impulse – something that transcends our normal preoccupations with what is good for us personally – a deep desire to be part of something larger. This impulse is perhaps linked to the same basic motivations that moves us to want to have children or to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of a greater good as in times of war.

I know that the concrete compensation for your work does not match the importance of your work as I have portrayed it. I hope you forgive us as a society for being caught up in the pursuit of self-interest or being influenced by simple-minded attacks against you for tragic system errors. Forgive us and instead believe that we, if we take the time to understand your work, appreciate you for taking up this noble task of helping those who are the most vulnerable of us. Thank you. I mean that sincerely, thank you.