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SOCIAL WORK DURING A HEALTH PANDEMIC

We are in strange and anxiety-producing times. As the media began discussing coronavirus, or COVID19, in January 2020, their reports were an early signal that world as we had come to know it would be changing. Fast forward two months, and many of us are under stay-at-home orders. Italy experienced over 1000 deaths in one day. The world has over 600,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus infection and 28,000 deaths, with the U.S. numbers at just over 100,000 confirmed infections and 1,600 deaths [4]. We are in the midst of a public health pandemic and social workers must be a part of the response.

Social workers are needed. They are called by the Code of Ethics to practice social work values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence [6]. They are needed in this time of public health emergency. Their work along the continuum of social work from micro to macro levels will be crucial if they are to fulfill the professional obligations.

Some of us work at the micro and mezzo levels. As our population is increasingly isolated from social distancing, stay at home precautions/orders, isolation, and quarantine, we are already seeing reports of anxiety and depression increasing [2]. In addition to those working at the interpersonal levels, there is a need for increased macro level social work. Now social workers are tasked with using social work theories, models, and practice to actively ensure that this public health emergency does not allow these troubling practices to play out as resources are allocated. The list of topics and arenas where social workers are needed is extensive.

First, there is a divide between those who are able to work from home and those who are essential workers. Among those who get ill, there is also a divide between those who have paid time off and health care and those with no similar benefits [8]. We must acknowledge the disparate impact on those who are already living paycheck to paycheck or near the poverty line. At the same time, those who do not have similar benefits must report for work or risk losing their job. Some may find their jobs don't exist anymore. Those with health insurance do not need to weigh the potentially fatal question «how bad is too bad» before seeking medical assistance and further financial burden.

We know that socioeconomic status is correlated with increased risk of medical issues, which could put people in the high-risk category for severe complications if they contract the coronavirus. These factors only magnify the disparities. What are social workers and the national social work organizations doing to advocate for change that acknowledges and works to minimize these disparities? Our values call us to shine a light on the structural systems which perpetuate inequities and work hard to make changes to improve the overall public health of all communities during this pandemic and beyond.

There is currently a movement to advocate that governors release those who are in prison on technical violations and nonviolent misdemeanors [3]. Close confinement and living arrangements are ripe for the rapid spread of infection. Social workers and national social work organizations should be a part of the national advocacy movement to enact these precautionary and responsive changes in large numbers. Some of this advocacy can even be done from home by writing letters or making phone calls. This is not merely a criminal justice reform, but a public health response. This is but one of the issues being raised.

Others include treatment for those with substance use disorder who need continued access to methadone [1] or even alcohol withdrawal in states where access to liquor stores has been unexpectedly ended [7]. Homelessness or those who risk losing their homes when they cannot afford rent after losing their jobs is another. There is no limit to the number of issues that need social work advocacy. Social workers must rise to the challenge.

Though the situation is tumultuous right now, there is hope. Social workers are experts in working in challenging environments. They learn skills that help them be collaborators. And they view the world through their social work social justice lens. They can make a difference. It is time to roll up sleeves and social work. Social workers must use the whole continuum of social work to do so. I look forward to partnering with many of my future colleagues to do this hard work moving forward. In the wise words of Elie Wiesel, «There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.» I believe we are in these times. Let's assert the power of social work to work alongside communities to make a change. Let's do this.

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