

# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

## *NASW Social Justice Priorities 2016–2017*

### OVERVIEW

It is without dispute that NASW and the social work profession, in general, recognize the immediacy and importance of social justice as a national imperative. With that in mind, the NASW Department of Social Justice and Human Rights was asked to take the lead in developing a draft of five social justice priorities that will serve as guiding principles for the national office and the NASW chapters. Soon afterward, chapters participated in a conference call to discuss the proposed social justice priorities and completed a priority survey to rank the five priorities.

During the April 2016 NASW Board of Directors meeting, the board members were presented with an overview and discussion of five recommended social justice priorities. The board was asked to consider the recommendations and consent to NASW National to announce the social justice priorities as part of NASW's priority objectives.

### The five NASW Social Justice Priorities are:

- » **Voting Rights**
- » **Criminal Justice**
- » **Juvenile Justice**
- » **Immigration Reform**
- » **Economic Justice/Equity**

### Within this set of board social justice and human rights priorities are a number of sub-priorities:

- » Health (and Behavioral Health) Equity
- » Racial and Population-Based Discrimination
- » Judiciary/Supreme Court Nominations (Courts Matter)
- » Environmental Justice

### WHY FIVE SOCIAL JUSTICE PRIORITIES?

Five national social justice priorities is not an arbitrary number. It is based on the assumption that to make a full commitment to working on NASW national social justice priorities, organizationally we have to define a specific limit on the number of priorities to which we commit in a given year. The five that were selected for this initial set of social justice priorities represent issues relevant to the nation, as a whole.

The sub-priorities are areas that are determined to have national prominence and, while not listed as a primary priority, they represent issues that are likely to require statements, blog posts, or briefs by NASW on an ongoing basis.

### FLEXIBILITY & CHANGING PRIORITIES

Organizationally, we must develop mechanisms and define processes to review and modify NASW's social justice priorities from year to year.

For example, in the area of voting rights there is a real possibility that, through intense advocacy, courts will outlaw voter suppression laws enacted in many states. Congress may pass an amended voters' rights law that would replace the Voting Rights Act struck down by the Supreme Court in 2014. Should the reforms take place, NASW will have the flexibility to identify a more pressing social justice issue that would replace voters' rights as one of the five top priorities.

Because of a wide range of social conditions that can be labeled as a social justice or human rights matter, it would be difficult for NASW to respond to an unlimited number of social justice/human rights issues. Therefore, in formulating strategies for addressing social justice/human rights issues during a given year, it would be advisable for NASW to identify and specify a set number of issues on which to focus. In addition, there should be an annual review of NASW social justice priorities to determine whether new priorities have emerged and we thereby replace a given priority from the previous year, or a

short-term priority has been sufficiently resolved and should be removed from the NASW priority list.

## PRIORITY CATEGORIES

NASW social justice and human rights long-term priorities can be categorized as being short-term, medium-term, long-term, and immediate pivot issues.

**Short-term** social justice/human rights injustices can be defined as issues, often of national significance, that arise unexpectedly but have potential negative consequences to millions of people. A prime example of a short-term concern is sequestration. Sequestration was supposed to be a relatively painless congressional budget tool that ended with the unintended consequence of forcing draconian cuts in nonmilitary discretionary spending. There is an impact on safety-net programs critical to vulnerable low-income populations, especially minorities, for example defunding of the Head-Start Program. Short-term issues can often be resolved, through legislation or policy change, in less than a year. However, responding to short-term injustices, such as those resulting from sequestration, can reach crisis proportions and require significant mobilization on the part of various advocacy groups. Responding to short-term injustices can be time-consuming and require the organizational capacity to attend meetings, issue position statements, and respond to sign-on letter request.

**Medium-term** social justice/human rights circumstances often include targeting specific institutional injustices for major reforms through policy changes and legislation. A useful example of a medium-term issue is criminal justice reform. Through many years of advocacy, there is now a national consensus that major criminal justice reform is needed. However, it will take several years of federal and state policy changes for myriad criminal justice processes. In addition, it will take several years for legislation that addresses such concerns as over-criminalization and racial disparities in sentencing. The medium-term issues require ongoing legislative advocacy, grassroots pressures at the state level, and working closely with like-minded coalitions.

**Long-term** social justice/human rights concerns are those that have had a lasting historically pervasive presence in the American culture. Obvious examples of long-term social justice concerns are racism, sexism, and homophobia. Injustices in these areas have existed since the country's inception and are likely to continue, on some level, for years to come.

**Immediate pivot issues** are major social justice issues that occur unexpectedly, are of national significance, and affect social work values, policies, and practice. When such issues arise, NASW leadership will often ask that we pivot away from a given social justice issue on which we are working, and immediately respond by:

- » issuing an official public statement that expresses NASW's concerns;
- » joining with other organizations and coalitions in an advocacy call to action; and/or
- » writing a full social justice brief that analyzes and makes recommendations about how to address the issue of concern.

## APPROACH

### Coalition Advocacy Model

The key points to be made about coalition advocacy are that coalitions are relatively informal and share leadership and resources. Coalitions generally emerge from a common concern about a given national social justice and/or civil rights issue. More often than not, the driving forces behind building a coalition are well-known and well-established national organizations such as the Sentencing Project, Human Rights Watch, NAACP, American Civil Liberties Union, and the National Immigration Law Center. However, an effective and productive avenue for building coalition advocacy is through an "umbrella" coordinating organization under which multiple organizations can meet, plan, and pool resources to address a specific issue. Two prominent examples of such "umbrella" organizations are:

- » **The Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights (LCCR)**  
LCCR comprises over 200 organizations. The importance of LCCR is that its member organizations have a broad range of issue areas in which they can actively participate as a coalition. LCCR offers meeting space, leadership in organizing workgroups and legislative/policy objectives for a given issue, and opportunities for members to voice their organizational points of view and receive support on a given issue. There are also opportunities to build a network of contact people and opinion leaders for future reference.
- » **The Open Society Foundation (OSF)/Justice Roundtable**  
Our involvement with the OSF has been primarily related to criminal and juvenile justice concerns under the Justice Roundtable. Unlike LCCR, there are no dues paid by organizations that regularly participate with the Justice Roundtable. Participation on the Justice Roundtable is very fluid and informal. However, OSF has committed its staff and facilities in support of the Roundtable, producing an online newsletter called the

Justice Roundtable E-Blast. Currently, there are over 10 Justice Roundtable working groups that meet regularly, including Criminal Justice Reform Commission, Reentry, Collateral Consequences, Sentencing Reform, Prison Reform, Juvenile Justice, Drug Policy, Solitary Confinement, and Immigration Policy. NASW is more active in the Reentry, Collateral Consequences, Prison Reform, Drug Policy, Sentencing Reform, Criminal Justice Commission, and Juvenile Justice working groups.

## WORKING GROUPS STRUCTURE

Working groups are the usual vehicles for small groups to work on a particular policy and/or legislative item. The working groups use regular face-to-face meetings and conference call to strategize and develop plans of action for pushing for legislation or policy change. Each member of the working group is expected to contribute to the discussions and to participate in action steps.

## Examples of Current Social Justice Coalition Activities

- » **Criminal Justice Coalition** – is led by OSF through its Justice Roundtable. The activities of Justice Roundtable coalition are organized around the involvement group of over 70 national organizations that have disparate criminal and juvenile justice concerns. The Justice Roundtable functions through multiple working groups and has an open-ended process for becoming a member.
- » **SCOTUS Noms Coalition** is a national coalition formed to advocate for hearings and a confirmation vote for Judge Garland, President Obama’s Supreme Court nominee.

- » **No Riders Coalition** is an ad hoc national economic justice coalition that is active in ensuring that funding for safety-net programs in the federal 2016 budget are protected from “poison pill” riders by conservative members of Congress.
- » **End Gun Violence Coalition** is a national coalition of public health professionals (including social workers) working to restore funding to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to conduct research on the causes and prevention of gun violence.
- » **Health Disparities** is generally seen as a social justice as well as a public health issue. It is linked to the National Institute of Minority Health Disparities (NIMHD) by way of its Health Disparities Scholars Program and the Listserv associated with the program. NIMHD provides funding for research on health disparities. The social justice department is in the process of meeting with NIMHD to discuss possible research opportunities on the social determinants of health from a social work intervention perspective.

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