

## **TO OUR FELLOW SOCIAL WORKERS: IT'S NEITHER COOPERATE NOR CONDEMN-IT'S "BOTH AND." LET'S PROCEED WITH COURAGE, CONVICTION AND ACTION 6-30-2020**

We are offering this commentary to further the current dialogue about the role of social work in law enforcement today. We are writing with strong conviction that a **third way** is possible, moving from "either/or" to a "both/and" perspective. Yes, social workers and the agencies they work for have too often been part of the problem as have schools, health care, and housing agencies. Yes, there needs to be an intentional, deliberate strategy to address the social ills, inequities and systemic disparities that have divided American society, starting with ending mass incarceration, demilitarizing the police, and ending the loss of rights of the formerly incarcerated. And yes, we can be an active and vocal collective force for change on the inside and on the outside, at the grassroots level and in the halls of political power.

Social workers now have a window of opportunity to be meaningful voices in this time of transformative change if we proceed with humility, self-awareness and commitment to listen to and involve those with the lived experience of racial, social, and economic injustice. Of course we are not the "magic ingredient" as noted in <https://medium.com/@alandettlaff/an-openletter-to-nasw-and-allied-organizations-on-social-works-relationship-with-law-enforcement1a1926c71b28> Who is? For the first time in generations social workers are being acknowledged for our knowledge, skills, values, and expertise in the public domain. For too long we have taken "the blame" and too often blamed ourselves for systemic issues far beyond any profession's purview. **This is the time to step up to address this issue and others with courage, conviction, and action.**

Many communications now seem to be based on a "zero sum" perspective on which groups advance in value. It implies that we need to take away from one in order to gain in another, instead of saying we can promote multiple avenues for radical reform. If we want to win the hearts and minds of the American people, we need to break from binary slogans of "defunding" and replace them with a **transformative platform** tied to reinvesting in social services, training guardians not warriors, and ending all forms of racial injustice in law enforcement, sentencing, incarceration, parole and probation. In this way we carve a way forward that demonstrates that "Black Lives Matter" in ways other Americans can support and advance.

We must absolutely condemn the militarization of police, root out implicit bias, expose other racist policies and practices, and address the generational abuse of communities of color. **And** we must at the same time, involve the most affected communities in a meaningful dialogue that could include community policing, master training, and sustained collaboration between social workers, police, and community members at a micro and macro level with real accountability measures. There also will need to be a sharp focus (with sufficient resources) on the social determinants of health and community well-being. All this will require additional redistribution of resources through progressive tax policies.

We cannot wait until we "dismantle racism within our own system of care," as the statement says, before we address other inequitable systems. We can do both at the same time! Of course, the Code of Ethics of our National Association of Social Workers and our Educational Policy

and Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education could and should be improved, but blaming our field seems counter-productive. Are doctors and nurses being criticized for treating patients and not ending the inequitable disparate US health system? Are educators being criticized for not ending the gaps in school achievement? The answer is we all can and must do more. The difference now is that many political leaders, policymakers, the media, are listening. Social workers are being called upon to be part of the solution. That should make us proud, and humbly alert as well. We understand the risks we may need to take, and should be confident to stand alongside today's movement leaders and together carve a way forward.

Valerie Jarrett provides relevant comments. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-postlive/2020/06/15/transcript-race-america-conversation-with-valerie-jarrett/> She promotes both national standards and policies and the need for additional funding for the types of programs our communities deserve. She and others specifically acknowledge the positive role social workers could play in “unbundling police work,” a term used by Derek Thompson in June 11 article in *the Atlantic*. Charles Lewis provides thoughtful commentary on a way forward <https://www.nasw-michigan.org/news/514044/DEFUNDING-THE-POLICE.htm>

Social workers need to be part of well-funded, thoughtfully constructed and implemented initiatives to identify the many criminal justice approaches that have worked, as well as antiviolence programs, alternatives to incarceration, restorative justice, rape crisis programs, community policing, anti-racist training, preventive mental health and child abuse, domestic violence, suicide prevention. and others ... ALL of which so many social workers have been and continue to be involved with for so long. Let us stand with those leading change with pride, humility and courage. If we stand together, as one is lifted so are we all! And that includes social workers.

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