



How to Prepare Social Workers to Serve Families and Communities in an Era of Uncertainty and Injustice

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The policies and programs affecting U.S. immigrant and refugee communities are changing at a dizzying rate. In September 2019, the *Los Angeles Times* published the article: "Trump administration's 'public charge' rule has chilling effect on benefits for immigrants' children," and just three days later, *The New York Times* published the piece: "Trump Administration Considers a Drastic Cut in Refugees Allowed to Enter U.S." These headlines call attention to complex issues affecting families and communities across the U.S.

In this memo, we argue that social work has a critical role to play in responding to these political changes, and provide ideas for topics and strategies that could be incorporated into training for social work students, practitioners, and researchers in how to effectively respond to these changes.

One of the major tenets of social work research and practice is a focus on understanding and addressing the various social and environmental factors that affect individuals' and families' behavior, as well as the value the profession places on social justice and the dignity of every person. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics affirms these values.

In addition, many in the profession [have responded](#) to these dramatic policy shifts by speaking out against the current administration's actions. The NASW released [a statement](#) on July 15th, 2019 stating, "The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is deeply troubled and concerned about Trump administration removal raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents on migrant undocumented families... The raids, which began this weekend, will have devastating long-lasting harm on children, families and communities... Many social service organizations and mental health providers, including social workers, will be called upon to respond to this latest round of senseless family separations initiated by the Trump administration."

Preparing Students to Work with Affected Communities

Moving forward, the profession must not only continue to speak out, but also determine how to prepare social workers with the knowledge and skills required to work with those most affected by recent policy changes. Despite the urgency created by current political climate, previous research suggests that social work students and practitioners do not always feel fully equipped to respond to these shifting needs.

To prepare social workers for the workforce requires helping them understand the immigration process through both trauma-informed and strengths-based lenses. Immigrants may endure discrete forms of trauma during each stage (pre-migration, migration, and post-migration) of the migration process. During the pre-migration stage, exposure to [violence](#) and [poverty](#) can be extreme. After leaving the country of origin, immigrants often face a [perilous journey](#) with limited supplies. Many meet further violence when traveling to the U.S. border. Finally, after entering the United States, immigrants contend with language and cultural barriers, discrimination, and separation from their loved ones, among other stressors. While coping with such hardships, immigrants often demonstrate profound strength and resilience, leaving their known lives behind to seek safety and well-being.

[National data](#) suggest that the U.S. Latinx population is changing, in that there is an increasing diverse mix of countries represented, and the percentage of foreign-born people is declining within the Latinx population. Social workers need to be prepared to support this diversity. Yet, findings from a recent study by [Held, Cuellar, & Cook Heffron \(2018\)](#) of MSW students from two U.S. states found that students reported low rates of feeling prepared to serve Latinx immigrants (3.57 of a 5-point scale; 5 = most prepared), of being aware of immigrant

experiences during each stage of the migration process (3.32 of 5), and of being prepared to understand the impact of the migration process on immigrant well-being (3.59 of 5). Those who *did* feel prepared by their program demonstrated greater knowledge about the experience of migration. We argue that incorporating information about current migration issues is critical for those who serve individuals and families affected by the many recent changes to immigration policies and programs.

Incorporating Current Political Events into Social Work Curricula

Social work students should have opportunities to discuss the impact that changes in policy are having on immigrant families and communities. Social work educators should provide opportunities to learn about federal and local policies that have an immediate impact on health, well-being, and service utilization of immigrant clients (e.g., immigration and child welfare policies). Students should also learn about immigrant communities' cultural and social norms and learn to critically analyze policies with this knowledge. This content could be integrated into general education courses that discuss work with diverse populations, as well as specialized courses on practice with individuals and families and policy courses.

In addition to integrating content on policy trends into social work curricula, educators can provide students opportunities to delve more deeply into these issues via class assignments and student presentations. Group-based policy analysis can provide students an opportunity assess current policy debates and their implications at multiple levels. In addition to group work, students also benefit from guest lectures by social workers, lawyers, advocates, and members of immigrant communities who can contextualize the immigration crisis.

Similar training should also be broadly available to current social work practitioners. As new policies inflict trauma, pose threats to health, and create new needs among clients, practitioners might not feel fully prepared to respond. Social workers should be trained in how to effectively and appropriately respond to such situations, so that they are able to help clients find and obtain the legal and economic support they may need. For example, social workers who work with undocumented clients can benefit from training in the importance of legal paperwork such as Power of Attorney documentation, which can allow children to be placed with family friends if parents are deported or detained. Toolkits like [this one](#) offered by the National Association of Social Workers can be helpful for helping social workers identify critical resources for these families.

Researchers can help unpack and address the effects of raids and other dramatic policy shifts. Social work researchers are uniquely positioned to examine how recent policy changes impact individuals, their families, and their communities. Researchers should aim to be prepared to respond quickly after raids happen and when new policies are announced. Insights from this type of research could help highlight both the detrimental impacts on – and the resilience of – immigrant communities. Social work research can also help to document the trauma caused by discrimination and harmful policies, and examine the effectiveness of current strategies to address these issues.

Social workers are called by the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics to challenge social injustice, and to continually develop and enhance their professional expertise. Urgent action is needed to ensure practitioners, advocates, and researchers can effectively and knowledgeably respond to the shifting needs of immigrant families and communities in such uncertain times.