



2023–2024 LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY AGENDA

National Association of Social Workers, Pennsylvania Chapter

The National Association of Social Workers, Pennsylvania Chapter (NASW-PA) is part of the world's largest organization of professional social workers and represents approximately 4,000 professional social workers in the Commonwealth.

I. Support Our Essential Social Work Workforce

- ❖ **PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK:** Pennsylvania's social workers are highly educated, qualified, and are the Commonwealth's most numerous providers of mental health services. They provide critically needed services to millions of Pennsylvanians each year in a broad range of settings including healthcare, schools, child welfare, correctional institutions, community agencies, and private practice. Demand for social workers is expected to grow, but the supply is not projected to keep pace without action. Social workers face low salaries, high safety risks, and regulatory barriers. NASW-PA calls on the General Assembly to ensure a strong social work workforce will be available to meet the needs of Pennsylvanians in crisis. This includes fully implementing the recommendations of the Behavioral Health Commission and sustained investment with recurring funds.
- ❖ **CREATE A LOAN FORGIVENESS PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC SECTOR SOCIAL WORK STAFF:** A 2020 report indicated that new social workers reported mean debt of \$66,000, with mean debt of \$49,000 attributed to attaining the MSW. Debt burden was higher for Black and Brown students. Combined with low wages, this debt can be quite formidable and make working in the public sector unattractive. Loan forgiveness for social workers in the public sector could help attract qualified candidates to these critical jobs, including Children and Youth, Substance Abuse and Mental Health/Intellectual Disabilities staff, and public-school social workers.

II. Improve Access to Mental and Behavioral Health and Provide High Quality Health Care to All

- ❖ **SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASE BASE FUNDING FOR COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES:** The one-time infusion of ARA funding in 2023 will allow counties to meet needs that are currently unmet. However, in order to make it possible for counties to turn this investment into a stronger ongoing mental health system to meet ongoing needs, this investment must be coupled with reoccurring revenue to both support new initiatives AND increases in base funding for mental health in order to provide statewide system stability.
- ❖ **PERMANENTLY EXPAND TELEHEALTH/TELETHERAPY:** Telehealth waivers created during COVID-19 should be made permanent to provide greater access to care. This is especially in mental health, where there are few to no differences in efficacy between in-person and remote therapy. The use of audio-only devices and payment parity with in-person rates are essential components.
- ❖ **EXPAND HEALTH COVERAGE:** Pennsylvania should expand health coverage by providing a public option or allowing individuals/families to buy-in to Medicaid. We should also take measures to reduce the cost of prescription drugs. Additionally, following the scheduled end of the national public health emergency, Pennsylvania health insurance plans, including Medicaid and CHIP, should be required to continue free or very low-cost coverage of testing, vaccines, and treatment for COVID-19. Additionally, when the General Assembly enacted Cover All Kids, it extended health care coverage to almost every child in Pennsylvania – except the 19,000 statewide who do “not meet the citizenship requirements of Title XXI of the Social Security Act.” Pennsylvania should extend coverage to ALL children in the state.
- ❖ **REDUCE SUICIDE RATES:** NASW-PA supports efforts to reduce suicide, especially amongst vulnerable and at-risk populations such as elders, military/veterans, and LGBTQ+ youth. These efforts should include measures to allow police, with a judge's order, to seize an individual's firearms if the person is at risk of harming themselves or others.
- ❖ **SUPPORT REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AND ABORTION ACCESS FOR ALL:** NASW-PA affirms all individuals have a right to bodily autonomy, that abortion is health care, and that all individuals have the right to freedom of choice in accessing essential health care services most especially their reproductive health. NASW-PA opposes any constitutional amendments or other efforts to limit reproductive health care in Pennsylvania, or to limit the ability of therapists to discuss abortion with clients.

III. Eliminate Racism, Advance LGBTQ+ Rights and Equality, and Ensure Gender Equity

- ❖ **REDUCE CULTURAL BIAS AND SYSTEMIC RACISM:** NASW-PA acknowledges the historical and current impact of cultural bias and systemic racism, and encourages the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to recognize and take steps to address wherever possible. This includes requiring training for those engaged in occupations that interact with the public and licensed through the Department of State. NASW-PA rejects the false narrative surrounding “CRT” and opposes any efforts to limit or curtail discussions on diversity.
- ❖ **REVERSE EFFORTS TO MARGINALIZE TRANS PEOPLE:** Trans individuals are a current target of discrimination and marginalization that is finding its way into state houses, with bills being passed to limit school activities of trans youth, ban or curtail all gender-affirming care, redefine child abuse to include parents of trans kids, ban drag performances, etc. This type of legislation is dehumanizing, actively harmful to an already oppressed group, and can be linked to an increase in violence against trans people. The Pennsylvania General Assembly must reject these trends and should instead take measures to protect and affirm the rights of all trans people.
- ❖ **END CONVERSION THERAPY AND ENSURE LGBTQ+ EQUAL PROTECTION:** Pennsylvania should protect the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ minors in Pennsylvania by banning sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) for individuals under the age of 18, also known as “conversion” therapies. Research on impacts of conversion therapy find it to be harmful and dangerous, with LGBTQ+ youth who have experienced conversion therapy more than twice as likely to report having attempted suicide than those who had not. Governor Wolf’s 2022 Executive Order was a good start, but the Commonwealth needs to ensure that ALL children are protected from this fraudulent and traumatic practice. Pennsylvania should also adopt legislation amending the Human Relations Act to add protections against discrimination based on sexual preference and gender identity.

IV. Ensure Healthy Development for All Youth

- ❖ **PROTECT AND PROVIDE FOR MALTREATED CHILDREN:** Pennsylvania must ensure that vulnerable children are protected, and adequate resources are allocated to identify abuse and neglect. A statewide salary scale, similar to the one for Income Maintenance workers, would shorten the hiring process and reduce turnover, as well as lessen the cost of continuous retraining of the workforce. County Children and Youth agencies struggle to attract and keep staff who serve our most vulnerable children and their families. Funding is needed to boost entry level salaries and provide incentives to stay, including reimbursing counties 100% of salaries for all Child Welfare Caseworker positions. Additionally, we should use a portion of the opioid settlement funds coming to PA to strengthen services to families and children in the child welfare system impacted by the opioid epidemic.
- ❖ **PROMOTE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK:** Students in Pennsylvania receive inconsistent access to mental health services within the schools, with some districts maintaining multiple school social workers and others having few to none. The data on having social workers in the school setting indicates that they can have positive effects on the educational setting, including: alleviation of school violence, reduction of dropout rates and expulsions, and improvement of student mental health.
- ❖ **CONTINUE TO INVEST IN MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN OUR SCHOOLS:** The 2022-23 State Budget includes \$95 million for school mental health grants to support mental health early intervention, self-care and suicide awareness, restorative justice, bullying and bullying prevention, counseling services, staff training, trauma-informed education, and more. NASW-PA believes that providing better access to mental health services in schools is a more effective means to reduce school violence than increasing law enforcement presence. Funding for this initiative should be continued in subsequent budgets, to ensure that our schools are able to provide a supportive environment and adequately address the mental health needs of our children.
- ❖ **FUND EDUCATION:** NASW-PA believes children and youth are best served through a high-quality, fully funded public educational system that includes preschool, elementary, and secondary education, including the Fair Funding Formula for all allocations.
- ❖ **ENSURE ACCESS TO LEARNING:** Neither the Commonwealth nor local Pennsylvania school districts should engage in book banning, especially to reduce access to Black, Brown, or LGBTQ+ themes and characters. Additionally, Pennsylvania should act to ensure students are given access to books and coursework exploring the contributions of women and minorities in history.

V. Advance Long and Productive Lives

- ❖ **FUND HOME- AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES (HCBS):** NASW-PA supports providing comprehensive, high-quality, affordable long-term services and supports enabling people with disabilities and older adults to maintain maximal quality of life in their setting of choice, including home- and community-based care. Ensure access to home health, including social services.
- ❖ **ADDRESS GUN VIOLENCE:** Pennsylvania must lead in implementing policy, including direct interventions and prevention measures, to reduce the public health crisis of gun violence. These efforts must neither further stigmatize mental illness nor exacerbate racial and ethnic disparities in our criminal justice system. Specific policy recommendations include requiring firearm storage with a lock or in a safe, implementing red-flag laws, and adopting a ban on semi-automatic assault weapons.

- ❖ **ENSURE ACCESS TO SAFE, AFFORDABLE HOUSING:** Pennsylvania should expand investment in affordable housing and in programs for homeowners/landlords to make substandard housing livable, energy efficient and free from health hazards. The Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that fair market rents have increased more than 21% in just the last four years, and that there is a critical shortage of housing for low-income families. NASW-PA supports the creation of a permanent rental assistance program, continued investment in the Whole-Home Repair Program adopted in 2022, allocations for the PA Housing Tax Credit, and allocated funding for lead abatement efforts to keep housing safe and usable.

VI. Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment

- ❖ **PRESERVE OUR ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:** NASW-PA supports efforts to protect our environment, including preserving Pennsylvania's farms, and taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We also support investing in low-income and minority communities harmed by pollution and continuing to eliminate lead from Pennsylvania's drinking water.
- ❖ **ENFORCE CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY:** Exposure to toxins, such as vinyl chloride in the East Palestine, OH train derailment, frequently causes health impacts not seen for years, along with mental health impacts of the loss of a sense of safety. Pennsylvania needs to ensure that full support is provided to monitor and treat victims and to restore the communities impacted. Additional regulation and enforcement are also necessary to ensure safety and environmental-protection measures are taken by corporations, for example requiring upgrades to braking systems on trains, to prevent further accidents.

VII. Reduce Extreme Economic Inequality and Build Financial Capability and Assets

- ❖ **PROTECT WORKERS:** NASW-PA supports creating livable wages by increasing the minimum wage to a recommended \$15/hour and ending sub-minimum wages. Additionally, Pennsylvania should ensure every worker has paid family leave and sick time.
- ❖ **REDUCE STUDENT DEBT:** Pennsylvania should make tuition affordable, ensuring students can earn a degree without going into debt. NASW-PA supports loan forgiveness and programs to reduce the debt burden on current students or graduates.
- ❖ **RAISE THE TANF GRANT LEVEL:** Current TANF grant levels keep 60,000 children in deep poverty. The maximum support for most families is \$134.33/person/month, insufficient to cover basic needs. Pennsylvania has not raised the grant levels since 1990, while cost of living has risen by 122%. NASW-PA supports a substantial increase to grant levels, and an annual cost of living adjustment.

VIII. Achieve Equitable Criminal Justice

- ❖ **REDUCE UNNECESSARY INCARCERATION:** Pennsylvania should adopt policies to eliminate cash bail, limit the length of probation, and stop the practice of reincarcerating citizens for administrative violations such as missing an appointment.
- ❖ **ELIMINATE SYSTEMIC RACISM IN POLICING:** Pennsylvania should continue to address police violence against Black and Brown citizens and systemic racism in policing by increasing citizen oversight, limiting use of lethal force, decertifying officers who are terminated or disciplined for reckless disregard for public safety, and publicly reporting data on routine police activities by race.
- ❖ **ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH'S ROLE IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE:** Severe reduction of community mental health services have led to an overrepresentation of those with mental illness within Pennsylvania's prisons. Additionally, police are often ill prepared to deal with those in mental health crisis, often with tragic results. NASW-PA believes properly trained personnel are essential to humane treatment of those with mental illness. Pennsylvania should invest in mental health and utilize crisis mobile response teams in lieu of police.

IX. Advance Political Justice

- ❖ **EXPAND VOTING ACCESS:** Pennsylvania should invest in our democracy by adopting measures that make it easier for its residents to cast their ballots, including early voting, mail-in voting, and expansion of voter registration. NASW-PA also support measures to ensure votes are counted in a timely manner, including allowing pre-processing of mail-in ballots. NASW-PA strongly opposes reducing voter access, especially provisions disproportionately impacting communities of color.
- ❖ **END PARTISAN GERRYMANDERING:** NASW-PA supports efforts to improve representation for all Pennsylvanians through fair, independent legislative redistricting that is designed on a non-partisan basis. We oppose efforts to make statewide seats, such as the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, subject to partisan gerrymandering.