



NASW Ohio Statement on Proposals to Integrate Social Work with Current Policing

NASW Ohio is invigorated and inspired by the current shift in the United States to re-imagine community safety and policing as we know it. We recognize the many wins, both achieved and forthcoming, across the country that many of us never thought possible. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said “A riot is the language of the unheard” and today the marginalized and oppressed communities - particularly Black communities - are being heard in new and important ways. We want to express deep gratitude and respect for the community organizers, activists, and protestors whose efforts have won us the current moment.

It is critical that we work collectively to keep the pressure on until it is clear that all Black lives matter. Now is the time to dream big, to resist a mindset of scarcity, and to challenge ourselves to not simply accept systems as they are, because they are all we have known. We recognize that social workers are being named widely as part of a vision for a new direction. The Movement for Black Lives is a movement for community self-determination, control, and power. We agree with those that say that social workers have a role in this new path forward, but also want to be clear that our professional voices should never overshadow the voices of clients (defined for these purposes as all communities directly harmed by systemic racism and police violence), whose voices should remain centered as we move forward. At the Ohio Chapter, we are listening closely to these voices and will continue to center their leadership.

While we have not yet finalized our NASW Ohio plan for promoting policies and practices that achieve safety and justice for all, we feel our members deserve to hear where we are in our own process, particularly as our profession is cited in the news and by elected officials. We hear our members calling to defund the police. We understand that defunding the police means shifting funds and power to community-controlled systems to address the roots of society’s problems that have been inappropriately ceded to police (i.e. addiction, mental illness, homelessness, poverty). We are excited about initiatives that will redirect emergency calls to social workers who can effectively de-escalate and meet basic needs, avoiding police intervention entirely. We also recognize that many of our members work directly with police and are hesitant to embrace defunding as a solution. Creating distance between the profession of social work from policing will not happen overnight, and we recognize that incremental reforms are critical in the short term as we better define our goals for the long term. Though our position and path forward is not yet finalized, we are absolutely clear that the status quo is - and has been - unacceptable.

Recognizing that shifts are necessary, we look to the NASW Code of Ethics as a resource. Pulling from our guiding values and ethics, we have established the following tenets as a living document moving forward.

Guiding tenets for social workers regarding the Movement for Black Lives

Prioritizing the dignity and worth of ALL people.

We are not just seeking safety and justice for those who are unarmed (particularly in an open-carry state like Ohio) or deemed peaceful. We strive for an intersectional approach that centers the needs and experiences of the most marginalized including Black women (particularly Black transgender women) and Black disabled people (particularly those who experience serious and persistent mental illness symptoms). We recognize that Black queer and trans people face extremely high rates of trans- and homophobic violence and that police violence against all Black women and non-binary people rarely receives the same public outrage as violence against Black men. We will not stop until #ALLBlackLivesMatter, and we will know this is true when the most marginalized communities say so.

Driven by evidence

We lack much of the necessary data to effectively study police violence. NASW Ohio supports strengthening data collection on police brutality as a means to further accountability and action. We also recognize that some of the most common reforms like body cameras, implicit bias and de-escalation training lack evidence of effectiveness. For example, while body cameras on all police officers makes sense, it is clear from the deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and so many others that video of police brutality alone does not seem to increase the chances for a just outcome, though it can when paired with widespread public demands for accountability. We recognize that there are many variables that bear further study when it comes to training as police reform. We are also clear that we cannot settle for a justice system that relies on national outrage and attention to function.

Racism is a public health crisis that goes beyond policing

Police violence is only one manifestation of racism as a public health crisis. Underlying these gruesome, widely shared videos is an entire system of mass incarceration and centuries of systemic racism in public policy governing housing, healthcare and human services. Social workers see these impacts in every facet of health and human services where we work; as the predominant providers of behavioral healthcare in the state, in child and adult protection, doctors' offices and hospitals, schools, prisons, and nursing homes. In each of these areas of practice, racial disparities in outcomes are common, not because of factors internal to Black people and other people of color, but because of racism in the environment.

We have internal work to do

Systemic racism is not just a problem in police departments. Social workers also have a responsibility to address such oppression as it manifests in our profession starting during social work education. Systemic racism manifests within the behavioral healthcare and broader social service sectors where social workers have a responsibility to address it. We call all social workers, particularly white social workers, to be continually working to

undo our own racial biases and the manifestations of systemic racism within our agencies and the systems we work throughout. We must go beyond cultural competency. It is not enough to be not racist, social workers must be actively anti-racist.

We also acknowledge that social workers regularly work with the police, like during child welfare visits or when a client is experiencing a mental health crisis. It is critical that social workers evaluate the impact that our own relationship and reliance on police has on the well-being of our clients, particularly Black, Indigenous and other clients of color and clients experiencing mental health symptoms.

Police are not social workers

Criminalizing public health issues like addiction, homelessness, and poverty have never made our communities safer. By criminalizing these public health issues, police are tasked with providing interventions that they are not equipped to perform. Police operate from a framework that is entirely distinct from social work. While we may work on interdisciplinary teams with police officers, it is critical that social workers maintain distinction in our skill sets and professional identity.

As an association, we need to hear our members' and all social workers' perspectives so we can represent the profession effectively. We encourage you to contact us and our National office with any feedback.

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