

## CSWE Environmental Justice White Paper Outline

Submitted by: The Committee on Environmental Justice

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### **Introduction and Background**

Environmental issues are critical to social work education and practice. At the heart of these are the impact of climate change and environmental degradation that dramatically affect quality of life on earth as well as the social, political, and economic systems upon which human communities depend. Vulnerable populations, including those living in poverty, populations of color, and women, bear a disproportionate share of the consequences, leading to what is now understood as environmental injustice. While environmental issues are often discussed and perceived as belonging in a distal and international purview, this global crisis has local ramifications as viewed from a systems perspective.

Social work has historically demonstrated malleability, by evolving in concert with the nature and complexity of social issues and injustices. This is one of those times; a time in which we must recognize the interactive and interdependent nature of social, economic, political and environmental injustices. Similar to the pioneers in social work, we cannot continue to advocate for social and economic justice without properly attending to environmental justice. As professionals and educators we are well-versed in economic and social justice. We understand and have the skill set to confront injustice head-on. Yet, we have not attended to the underlying contexts of environmental injustice despite its disparate and expanding impact on vulnerable, poor, and communities of color.

As such, we must extend our understanding of the person-in-environment framework to encompass the ecological environment (both natural and created). The complexity of current and impending climate changes increases the urgency for engaging in interdisciplinary practice addressing the need for sustainable development, community building, responding to related health and mental health concerns, focusing on societal well-being, and mitigating and providing relief work in response to ecological disasters. Social work has the skill sets required to help bridge and translate across interdisciplinary players.

Social work cannot afford to wait for an invitation to engage in work that is currently underway to address environmental injustice concerns. It is incumbent upon us to demonstrate our critical role, join current interdisciplinary cutting-edge discussions, and demand a seat at the table where policy and practice decisions are made. To bring this to fruition, we must first recognize the urgency and relevance, educating ourselves and our students on the most pressing issues in

environmental justice and sustainability. Social work is in fact well situated to take a leadership role as we demonstrate the breadth of skills and values our profession offers, as well as the power we can harness in tackling injustice. We must use these professional assets to become leaders who prevent and fight environmental injustices and hold a seat at the table where critical decisions are made.

### **CSWE Role in Knowledge Development and Professional Education**

The Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) was recently revised. The CSWE Board approved the Educational Policies on March 30, 2015 and the Commission on Accreditation approved the Accreditation Standards on June 11, 2015. With the revisions, Environmental Justice has been added and integrated. Competencies 3 and 5 explicitly mention environmental justice. In addition, environmental justice related knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective behaviors could fit well under some of the other competencies.

The EPAS changes create an explicit mandate to educate our students about environmental justice and the related concepts, and offer an implicit mandate that it is part of our professional responsibility to address environmental injustices. This committee responded by offering the following definition of environmental justice.

*EJ definition.* Environmental justice occurs when all people equally experience high levels of environmental protection and no group or community is excluded from the environmental policy decision-making process, nor is disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards. Environmental justice affirms the ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, respect for cultural and biological diversity, and the right to be free from ecological destruction. This includes responsible use of ecological resources, including the land, water, air, and food.

The Committee also recognizes a need for defining sustainability. Effective change requires the stability implied. One definition is included here as a starting point for discussion.

*Sustainability definition.* Sustainable Development necessitates a “path of human progress which meets the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.43)

### **Responding to Educational/Training Needs**

*Highlight and elevate a human rights based framework.* This entails highlighting the allocation and development of resources including land, air, food and water, from a rights-based social work perspective.

*Highlight and promote an eco-centric paradigm.* This dimension establishes that humans do not operate outside the environment; rather, environmental well-being and human well-being are

inextricably linked. Using an eco-centric paradigm, social work can expand the person-environment framework to include the physical environment as well as the social environment, recognizing its role and responsibility in the global response to the environmental crisis.

*Point to the need for interdisciplinary education.* In today's increasingly connected and globalized world, collaborations amongst university departments and professional schools are on the rise. Evidence of this may be seen through interdisciplinary social work programs which view knowledge through a transdisciplinary lens combining such fields as international development, law, and public health in dual degree programs.

*Facilitate curriculum development.* This involves the development of models for integrating information about environmental issues across the curriculum, providing samples of potential electives, and operationalizing potential learning objectives. Material about environmental degradation and environmental justice can be integrated across the core curriculum--HBSE, Policy, Research, Practice [micro, meso, macro, mega), Introduction to Social Work Practice, Diversity Courses, Field, and Field Seminars.

One of the greatest challenges to incorporating environmental justice into social work schools and programs is operationalizing content through curriculum development. Learning objectives that elevate and substantiate environmental justice knowledge, values, theories, and skills should be intentionally infused into social work coursework. Potential learning objectives for courses that involve environmental justice may include the following:

- Critically explore and analyze how marginalized and vulnerable populations are differentially affected by environmental problems.
- Critique and discuss community development theories as they apply to addressing environmental injustices in food, land, water, and air resource contexts.
- Develop leadership skills to advocate for environmentally just policies at the local, regional, national, and international levels especially as they relate to tackling the implications of climate change.
- Develop and demonstrate an understanding of local social and environmental justice knowledge through a series of field assignments and community based learning.
- Demonstrate an understanding of environmental justice and how global environmental degradation and climate change impact the health and well-being of various populations in different localities.

Support Knowledge Development about Environmental Justice and Environmental Degradation

Knowledge development in these areas is minimal, but interest is expanding among faculty and students. CSWE can provide leadership to highlight the value of exploration in this area. For example, we can examine the ways climate change affects human communities locally and globally, investigate the magnitude of risk for vulnerable communities (locally and globally), and explore the role of community development as a change model.

#### Identify Practice Knowledge and Skills at All Levels of Practice

*Direct practice:* Expand the concept of the “environment”, recognizing the importance of the physical surroundings and housing situations of clients. This could include identifying issues like mold, lead poisoning, asbestos, polluted water systems, and toxic chemicals.

*Meso practice:* Recognize the community wide health and epidemiologic issues and examine a wider area of physical space that impact clients or client systems. Explore the role of organizations in the change process.

*Macro practice:* Identify policy and community practice arenas for advocacy and change. Expand knowledge about the role of environmental policies, how they are decided, and what can be done to advocate for change. Explore the impact of globalization and the role of governance in climate solutions and strategies through a human rights based framework.

#### Develop Tool Kit for Educators and Practitioners

Bibliographies: Offer bibliographies as a product and a tool that could be posted on the website.

Resources: List of environmental related resources including articles, videos, exercises, and activities.

Develop and post examples of syllabi, assignments, scenarios, case studies, and global exemplar.

Design models for integration into existing curriculum.

Post exemplars for modeling change. Highlight examples of greening efforts for classroom operations and programs including sustainably operated facilities on campuses. Discuss the importance and need for faculty to encourage a systems thinking approach to resource distribution. Encourage the use of technology for paperless pedagogy in supporting an environmentally just campus environment.

#### **Recommendations/ Implications**

Create a Council on Environmental Justice to continue the work started by this committee. This structure would highlight the ongoing significance of these issues and provide leadership for integration across social work education. The Council would have responsibility for exploring concerns and proactively providing leadership in developing environmentally just practice models. Below are a sample of council responsibilities:

Work with Annual Program Meeting conference organizers to “Green APM” and promote those opportunities in a timely manner so participants have sustainable choices when traveling and participating in the events.

Provide leadership in the development of a CSWE statement about its stand on climate change, environmental justice, and sustainability.

Link the issues to social work education and practice and develop models to implement the new educational policies. Work on the development of courses and curriculum. Gather information on work that is currently occurring, and provide training and educational sessions on the infusion of environmental justice across the curriculum.

Explore potential for advocacy and policy action at local, national, and international levels.

**Expertise of Committee Members:** The members of this committee all have experience in knowledge development, education, and practice related to issues of environmental degradation and injustice, and the sustainable development of mechanisms and practices for environmentally just communities.

*Rachel Forbes:* Involved with education for careers in sustainability-based and environmental justice focused jobs and integrating sustainability and environmental justice into social work curriculum. Experience with supporting local and regional environmental justice organizations through field education placements.

*Rashmi Gupta:* Involved in practice and policy issues related to sustainability and environmental justice from the personal to professional level of social work education both at national and international level. Interested in investigating the theoretical issues related to achieving sustainable levels of well being during end of life for all, guided by environmental justice strategies.

*Jessie Kadolph:* Focused on community organizing and advocacy for environmental justice issues, curriculum development and lesson planning, integration of environmental justice into macro HBSE and policy courses.

*Craig Mosher:* Teaching sustainability and environmental justice in macro social work courses. Building awareness and expertise about environmental justice issues on campus and through

committee work at BPD and CSWE. Direct practice in resilient sustainable community development.

*Ande Nesmith:* Research examining the intersection of environmental justice and current social work practice and where practitioners see educational needs. Integrating environmental content into research, HBSE, and large client systems, including service learning with local communities and policy advocacy. Mentoring students in preparing grant proposals and in implementing independent research projects on environmental justice.

*Meredith C. F. Powers:* Research on the professional socialization of social workers, ecological justice, and university-community partnerships for sustainability. A leader in the use of social media to impact social change and to engage in international collaboration as she has established and administers the growing, online network 'Green/Environmental Social Work Collaborative Network' for social workers around the world committed to ecological justice.

*Cathryne L. Schmitz:* A major focus on curriculum development with integration across the social work curriculum and the development of interdisciplinary coursework. Examines organizational change, integrate across theory and practice, the systemic violence of environmental degradation, the impact of environmental injustice on those already marginalized, and curriculum development integrating models for working toward environmental justice.