

## Human Rights **Update**

# FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: BUILDING THE PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK RESPONSE IN SUPPORT OF THE NATIONAL HIV/AIDS STRATEGY

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## NASW HIV/AIDS SPECTRUM PROJECT

The National HIV/AIDS Strategy (NHAS) is “the nation’s first-ever comprehensive coordinated HIV/AIDS roadmap with clear and measurable targets to be achieved by 2015” (NHAS, 2010). As a companion to the National HIV/AIDS Strategy the White House also issued the Federal Implementation Plan (the Plan) that outlined both short and long-term objectives in support of the NHAS. The federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued the HHS National Operational Plan, which further outlines cross – agency collaboration including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). In the fall of 2011, NASW received funding to support SAMHSA’s Center for Mental Health Services to further the implementation plan by expanding the knowledge and capacity of mental health service providers – particularly social workers – as they work to address the mental health and psychosocial issues confronting people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS. The funding created the *NASW Chapter HIV/AIDS Partnership Initiative*, a collaborative effort administered through the NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum: Mental Health Training and Education of Social Workers Project.

### **The National HIV/AIDS Strategy & the Federal Implementation Plan – Overview**

The NHAS identifies the steps to be taken to reduce incidence, increase prevention efforts, and educate all

Americans about HIV and AIDS with these over-arching objectives: 1) reduce new HIV infections; 2) increase access to care, and 3) reduce HIV-related health disparities. The NHAS Federal Implementation Plan (the Plan) outlines specific expectations for federal agencies to support and implement the Strategy as well as recommendations for a coordinated national response. As part of implementation of the NHAS, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other federal agencies have created the Twelve Cities Project focusing on the twelve metropolitan areas which are most severely affected by the HIV epidemic.

Through enhanced HIV prevention planning, the Twelve Cities Project is designed to build integration and collaboration between the various federal initiatives, and will demonstrate how federal HIV prevention care and treatment activities can work together to identify and respond to service gaps and unmet needs to achieve the goals of NHAS in an integrated fashion (HHS, 2011). The Twelve Cities Project emphasizes: (1) intensifying prevention for individuals at greatest risk – especially gay and bisexual men, transgender persons, Black Americans, Latino Americans, and substance users – along with testing those individuals to reduce undiagnosed HIV infection; (2) prioritizing prevention and linkage to care for people living with HIV; and (3) directing these intensified efforts to communities with the highest burden of HIV (HHS, 2011).

## The NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project – Overview

The *HIV/AIDS Spectrum: Mental Health Training and Education of Social Workers Project* (NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project) provides education, training, and technical assistance to health and behavioral health care providers in collaboration with federal and state agencies, universities, community-based organizations, state and local health and mental health agencies, NASW chapters and other professional associations. (NASW, 2012)

The goal of the NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project is to provide necessary practice skills to enhance and promote culturally competent practice with individuals, families, and communities affected by HIV/AIDS with particular focus on mental health, substance use, trauma, medication adherence, and the long-term health impact of HIV/AIDS. A Training of Trainers (TOT) model, utilizing expert social work trainers, presents on-site skill building continuing education workshops as well as internet based webinars and on-line courses. The NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project is funded through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, and is part of the Mental Health Care Providers Education in HIV/AIDS Program. The NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project supports the goals of the NHAS through expanding the number of social workers with the knowledge and skills needed to provide a range of psychosocial and mental health interventions, from prevention to treatment, for persons affected by and living with HIV/AIDS predominantly in the urban centers with the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence.

## From Policy to Practice

The following section outlines the three goals of the NHAS, the associated objectives of the HHS Federal Implementation Plan, and demonstrates how the NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project programming furthers the objectives of the Plan. Implications for social work practice and the role of professional social workers in supporting the NHAS are also highlighted.

### Reducing New HIV infections

To meet the goal of the NHAS to lower HIV new infections by 25% by 2015, the Plan calls for agencies to ensure availability of services to people living with HIV via targeted efforts to prevent and reduce transmission to

others. For example, HIV testing and related services can assist persons living with HIV to notify recent sex and needle sharing partners of possible risk and the need to get tested for HIV. The Plan also stresses that access to behavioral and biomedical interventions reduces HIV transmission; and linkage to medical and social services (including drug treatment and mental health services) can reduce transmission risk (NHAS, 2010).

In support of the Plan, the NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project curricula includes current research on bio-medical and behavioral health interventions intended to increase knowledge, skills and competencies for social workers to better promote health and mental health interventions with individuals, families, and communities.

### Increasing Access to Care & Improving Health Outcomes

The NHAS stresses the importance of linking care and coordination services throughout the range of settings where marginalized and at risk populations receive health and social services. In support of the NHAS, the Plan directs federal agencies to sponsor training for staff at community based organizations currently providing HIV testing to better equip programs to provide services as well as make appropriate referrals to care. It instructs agencies to take deliberate steps to increase the number and diversity of providers of services for persons living with HIV or AIDS, and to extend support to persons living with HIV and co-occurring health and behavioral health conditions. The Plan stresses the importance of medication adherence needed to ensure maximum benefit of anti-retroviral treatment and reduce likelihood of drug resistance (NHAS, 2010).

The NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project provides skill-building workshops that ensure providers implement a culturally relevant, holistic systems approach to engaging individuals in care, to increase coordination of

### NASW HIV/AIDS SPECTRUM interventions

complement and extend activities that will lead to realization of the NHAS goals and strategies, most specifically in the areas of professional preparedness, provider education, linkage to care and workforce development.

services with a particular focus on increasing medication adherence, and highlights the critical role of social workers to ensure that clients are linked to integrated and coordinated care.

Workshop and distance learning content provide specific clinical skills necessary to address co-existing mental health and substance abuse, risk reduction and change behaviors, and a systems approach to addressing environmental contextual challenges.

### Reducing HIV-related Health Disparities & Health Inequalities

The NHAS stresses that discrimination and stigma associated with HIV and AIDS is often a barrier to HIV testing, and a critical variable in people living with HIV to have poorer health outcomes. The NHAS suggests a number of actions to reduce HIV related stigma including repealing stigmatizing laws and better enforcement of current civil rights legislation. The Plan directs cross-agency collaboration at state and local levels, and to support community-based approaches.

The NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project addresses the critical role of social workers as leaders in organizing professional and consumer communities to advocate for policies that protects client and worker confidentiality, promotes social justice and civil rights protections for people with HIV and related groups. A hallmark of the NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project has been training in cultural competency for social workers to incorporate into their own practice setting, as well as with other providers to produce non-stigmatizing environment by reducing or eliminating the impact of personal and institutionalized stigma.

### Role of Professional Social Work in Support of NHAS

Social workers are involved in Ryan White Planning Councils and prevention planning groups, and work in programs funded by the federal agencies tasked to implement the NHAS. Social workers are skilled at cross disciplinary care and treatment, and implement the very practice skills addressed in the NHAS and the Twelve Cities Project: addressing continuity of and linkages to care, identification of HIV status, providing adherence supports, assisting in managing disclosure, and ensuring efforts to integrate treatment and prevention efforts.

Social workers work with vulnerable populations to ensure access to care, enhance and expand service delivery, provide mental health and health supports, and address health disparities through both direct practice and policy initiatives.

### Moving the Profession Forward: the role of the NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project

Through the NASW Chapter Partnership Initiative (Initiative), NASW is working with NASW colleagues and allies in the 12 cities as well as communities with emerging HIV incidence to seek out collaborations with state and local agencies identified in the NHAS Federal Implementation Plan (e.g., state departments of health and mental health/hygiene). Through conducting educational seminars within the larger social work community, the Initiative has increased the knowledge, skills and competencies of social workers across diverse fields of practice. The initiative increases the number of social workers skilled in health and mental health interventions with persons living with and/or at risk for HIV/AIDS, and how to support and achieve priorities of NHAS. The NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project also expands current training capacity through collaboration with allied behavioral health partners (e.g., American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association)

#### The 12 Cities & Estimated AIDS Cases

New York City, NY » 66,426

Los Angeles, CA » 24,727

Washington, DC » 15,696

Chicago, IL » 14,175

Atlanta, GA » 13,105

Miami, FL » 12,732

Philadelphia, PA » 12,469

Houston, TX » 11,277

San Francisco, CA » 11,026

Baltimore, MD » 10,301

Dallas, TX » 7,993

San Juan, PR » 7,858

*Cities represent 44% of US Total*

Source: National HIV/AIDS Strategy (2011), The Twelve Cities Project, <http://blog.aids.gov/downloads/NHAS-HHS-12.pdf>

via on-line distance learning courses; and has expanded provider communities through work with other federal such as the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) funded AIDS Education and Training Centers.

The NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project contributes to workforce development via workshops to community based organizations funded by SAMHSA and other federal agencies; by providing on-line information to social workers and allied health and mental health providers via webinars, practice updates/fact sheets; and through outreach to programs needing additional knowledge and practice skills in HIV, mental health and substance abuse disorders.

## References

NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum: Mental Health Training and Education of Social Workers Project (2012). Retrieved from [www.socialworkers.org/practice/hiv\\_aids/default.asp](http://www.socialworkers.org/practice/hiv_aids/default.asp)

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United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). (2011). Twelve Cities Project NHAS. Retrieved from [blog.aids.gov/downloads/NHAS-HHS-12.pdf](http://blog.aids.gov/downloads/NHAS-HHS-12.pdf)

To Learn More about HIV/AIDS: Understanding HIV/AIDS: The Social Work Role. (Comprendiendo el VIH/SIDA: El Rol del Trabajador Social). NASW WebED Course (FREE), visit [NASWebEd.org](http://NASWebEd.org)

To learn more about the NASW HIV/AIDS Spectrum: Mental Health Training and Education of Social Workers Project, visit [SocialWorkers.org/practice/hiv\\_aids](http://SocialWorkers.org/practice/hiv_aids)

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