

# *Social Work & Civil Rights*

## **General Background**

Since its inception, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has tirelessly fought for social justice, equality, and acceptance of America's marginalized individuals and groups. Through initiatives such as the Voting Rights Act and other statutes which safeguard the liberties of this nation's citizens, social work has played an indispensable role in preserving the freedom of all. Moreover, the role of social work within our country's civil rights movement is exemplified by social work icons like Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Their contributions affected the lives of America's disenfranchised while, underscoring that the effects of intolerance and discriminatory practices violate the essence of democratic principles. As witnessed throughout history, social workers seek to make the American dream a reality for everyone without regard to race, religion, sexual or national origin.

Despite equal protections that are enforceable under the U.S. Constitution, equitable treatment has not been achieved in the United States. The political, economic and social history of this nation is replete with examples of individual, organizational, institutional and societal discrimination. In addition, disparate treatment adversely affects whole groups of people on the basis of their ancestral heritage, culture, ethnicity, skin color, primary language, age, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and other identifiable factors. Intended and unintended aspects of discrimination impinge upon the core values of our nation. The mission of social work is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to the necessities and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. Our social change efforts include the alleviation of injustice and the promotion of policies that seek to redress oppression and ensure equality of opportunity. This approach provides an effective mechanism for forcing changes in patterns of misguided policies, specifically those which are discriminatory.

The National Association of Social Workers considers the protection of individual rights as well as the promotion of social justice paramount to the preservation of our collective well-being as a society. Our recommendations seek to address historical discrimination and the effects of such, while substantially pursuing greater inclusion for diverse groups who have been oppressed, underserved, and underrepresented.

## **Recommendations**

- Safeguard the civil rights of all through the selection of judicial nominees who uphold the Constitution and its principles.

- End the practice of racial profiling through the promotion of initiatives that fairly target the perpetrators of crimes rather than those who represent a particular racial/ethnic category.
- Ensure adherence to policies that protect voting rights, alleviate workplace discrimination and pay inequality for women and minorities.
- Embrace America's diversity through providing legal, humane and dignified pathways for immigrants who seek citizenship.
- Provide equal opportunity and accessibility in education via equitable and proportionate resource allocation for America's neediest.
- Preserve America's commitment to affirmative action by protecting those programs that engender equal employment opportunity and fair access for all.
- Fulfill America's inescapable promise of understanding by advocating for measures that endorse diverse gender identity and expression.

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#### Additional Resources

Engstrom, D.W., & Piedra, L.M. (2007). *Our diverse society: Race and ethnicity-Implications for 21st century American society*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

National Association of Social Workers. (2009). *Civil Liberties and Justice. Social work speaks: National Association of Social Workers policy statement, 2009-2012* (8th ed., pp. 49-53). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

National Association of Social Workers. (2009). *Racism. Social work speaks: National Association of Social Workers policy statement, 2009-2012* (8th ed., pp. 281-291). Washington, DC: NASW Press.