

# SOCIAL WORK

# BREAKS BARRIERS

## Theme & Rationale for Social Work Month — March 2023

### Social Work Breaks Barriers That Prevent People and Communities from Thriving

Chicago is experimenting with sending a team of mental health professionals, including social workers like Jennifer Garross, to manage the hundreds of mental health emergency calls the city receives each year. Instead of being arrested by police and put at risk of injury or even death, people who experience a mental health crisis are instead met by social workers such as Garross, who is a part of the Chicago Crisis Assistance Response and Engagement (CARE) program.

“We’re able to show up to a situation where there’s a mental health crisis [and], help to deescalate it,” Garross told CBS News. She added that social workers also provide clothing and other services to people they contact. The theme for Social Work Month is “Social Work Breaks Barriers” and Garross’ work is an example of how one city is using social workers to break through the barriers that prevent people from getting compassionate mental health care. However, social workers are in the business of helping people break barriers that prevent them from living life to its fullest in many more settings.

#### Here are examples:

- » Social workers such as Caitlin Ryan at the Family Acceptance Project work to help families overcome cultural and faith hurdles that prevent them from embracing and supporting children who are LGBTQIA2S+.

- » Social workers such as Suzin Bartley, former executive director at The Children’s Trust in Massachusetts, helped strengthen families by helping them break through economic, psychological, and other barriers so they can provide better care for their children.
- » And social workers such as Kristina M. Whiton-O’Brien, director of partnerships at Vot-ER, help remove obstacles that prevent people from exercising their right to vote.

Social work has been around for more than a century. The profession can trace a large part of its origins to Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Star, who in 1889 opened Hull House in Chicago to provide social services to the area, which had a large immigrant population. Other social work pioneers included anti-lynching advocate and women’s rights activist Ida B. Wells and George Edmund Haynes, a social worker who was co-founder of the National Urban League.

These social workers of the past also barrier breakers. Frances Perkins, the first female Labor Secretary during the Great Depression, and others helped secure benefits we continue to see used today, such as the 40-hour work week, minimum wage, and Social Security benefits. Other social workers, such as past NASW President Whitney M. Young Jr., worked in collaboration with President Johnson and other leaders during the turbulent Civil Rights era to break down the barrier of employment discrimination so Black people could get access to better paying jobs.

Thanks to the paths paved by such pioneers, social work is now one of the fastest growing professions in the United States, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. There were 715,000 social workers in the nation in 2020 and that number is expected to grow to more than 800,000 by the end of this decade.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL WORK?

Still, the public can have trouble understanding social work because the profession is so diverse. That is because social workers work in so many places, including schools, hospitals, mental health practices, veteran centers, child welfare agencies, corporations and state, federal and local government, to name a few.

Although there are many kinds of social work, members of the profession have some things in common. They are people dedicated to seeking complete equality and social justice for all communities and helping people achieve their own potential.

Each day social workers help break down barriers that prevent all us from living more fulfilling, enriched lives. They work on the individual levels, sometimes helping people overcome personal crises such as food insecurity, affordable housing, and access to good health care while also advocating on a macro level to ensure laws and policies are adopted to ensure all people enjoy such services.

## CAMPAIGN HIGHLIGHTS

During Social Work Month, NASW will spearhead efforts to raise public awareness about how social workers continue to break barriers and the contributions of the helping profession. Here is how:

- » **Survey:** NASW will reach out to thousands of people across the nation through advertisements to gauge their attitudes toward social workers and awareness of the services that social workers provide. Questions will include asking whether people have interacted with a social worker in the past year; was the interaction positive or negative; and did the social worker help the person overcome a personal barrier.
- » **Stories:** We will post brief videos and social media posts on social workers who have overcome hurdles to improve the lives of others. These social workers will include NASW Social Work Pioneers®.
- » **Promotional Online Toolkit:** The toolkit will include logos; suggested social media messaging; an official proclamation that highlights the role of Social Work in breaking racial, economic, and other societal barriers; and a draft press release, news editorial, and letter to the editor. Social workers and their allies can use these materials to pitch stories about social workers to the media or share Social Work Month messaging in their local newspapers.
- » **Merchandise.** Our official vendor Jim Coleman LTD provides merchandise that can be used to promote the Social Work Month theme “Social Work Breaks Barriers.”

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For more information on the 2023 Social Work Month “Social Work Breaks Barriers” Campaign contact NASW Communications Director Greg Wright at [gwright.nasw@socialworkers.org](mailto:gwright.nasw@socialworkers.org).