

# 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 met by social workers like Garross, who is 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 de-escalate it,” Garross told CBS News. She added that social workers also provide clothing and other services to people they contact. This year’s theme for Social Work Month is “Social Work Breaks Barriers,” and Garross’s work is an example of how one city is using social workers to break through barriers that prevent access to compassionate mental health care. Social workers in many other settings help break barriers that keep people from living life to the fullest.

#### Here are more examples:

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

Social work has existed for more than a century. The profession can trace a large part of its origin 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 include 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 and other social workers in history also were barrier breakers. Frances Perkins, the first female Labor Secretary during the Great Depression, and others helped secure benefits we continue to use today, such as the 40-hour workweek, minimum wage and Social Security benefits. Other social workers, like past NASW President Whitney M. Young Jr., worked in collaboration with President Lyndon B. Johnson and other leaders during the turbulent Civil Rights era to break down the barrier of employment discrimination so Black people could gain 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?

Social work can be difficult to understand because the profession is so diverse. Social workers work in many different places, including schools, hospitals, mental health practices, veteran centers, child welfare agencies, the criminal justice system, corporations, and state, federal and local governments—to name a few.

Although there are many kinds of social work, members of the profession all share common principles: 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 people from living more fulfilling, enriched lives. They work on the individual level, helping people overcome personal crises like food insecurity, lack of affordable housing, or limited access to good health care. They also advocate on a systems level to ensure laws and policies are adopted so everyone can access such services.

## CAMPAIGN HIGHLIGHTS

During Social Work Month, NASW will spearhead efforts to raise public awareness about how social workers continue to break barriers in all communities, and how the contributions of this essential profession improve our nation.

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 their awareness of the services social workers provide. Questions will include whether people have interacted with a social worker in the past year; if the interaction was positive or negative; and if the social worker helped the person overcome a barrier.
- » **Stories:** We will publish brief videos and social media posts about social workers who have overcome hurdles to improve the lives of others. These social workers will include NASW Social Work Pioneers®.
- » **Promotional Online Toolkit:** Resources 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 templates that can be used to draft a press release, news editorial, and letter to the editor. These materials can help social workers and their allies pitch social work stories to the media or share social work messaging in their organizations.
- » **Merchandise:** NASW's 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).