

# Practice Perspectives

## The National Association of Social Workers

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## Climate Change and Health: A Call to Social Workers

The accelerating rate of climate change is a threat to human health. On a global scale, climate change is affecting the way people live; its effects are seen in rising temperatures, extreme weather events, transmission of illness and disease, access to food and water, and changing agricultural patterns. Although climate change is a global issue, it touches each person individually.

It can be challenging to establish a direct connection between climate events and our daily lives when these concepts feel distant and people may feel that they are unable to contribute to solutions (<https://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ea-apa-psych-report-web.pdf>). However, becoming prepared and learning to mitigate the negative consequences of climate change can make people feel empowered. Social workers can help clients recognize and address emotional, health, and environmental factors to improve their well-being.

### Climate Science: Where Are We?

Over the past two decades the temperature on earth has warmed more than the past thousands of years, due to human activity and industries that use fossil fuel (oil, coal, natural gas), releasing greenhouse gases into the air. These

gases become trapped in the atmosphere and lead to a rise in temperatures. Since the late 1950s scientists have raised awareness about concerning trends in warming temperatures; today there is international consensus on climate change and its causes. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, convened by the United Nations, confirms the scientific consensus that human-induced climate change is accelerating the warming of the Earth ([www.ipcc.ch/sr15/](http://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/)). Drastic action must be taken to stop further warming (beyond 1.5 °C above preindustrial levels) and the resulting catastrophic consequences of climate change.

### Social Work Connection

The professional commitment to underserved and vulnerable populations necessitates that social workers are knowledgeable about climate change and its effects on people. The environmental perspective of social workers should be inclusive of the natural environment, not only social and familial systems ([www.ifsw.org/globalisation-and-the-environment](http://www.ifsw.org/globalisation-and-the-environment)). Gradually, climate change threatens our environment and patterns of living. Communities with less resources and capital are likely to be disproportionately affected by the negative effects of climate change in the United States and worldwide. The framework of environmental justice ([www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice](http://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice)) is essential to guide practice and policy responses to climate change.

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## Physical Health

Physical health is affected by various environmental factors. For example, the quality of the air has an impact on daily life. Ozone and particulate pollution are dangerous to breathe and contribute to asthma, respiratory infections, and impaired lung function ([www.lung.org/our-initiatives/healthy-air/sota/health-risks/](http://www.lung.org/our-initiatives/healthy-air/sota/health-risks/)). Scientific understanding of the effect of pollution on chronic diseases and internal organs such as the brain, liver, and heart is also developing ([www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpla/article/PIIS2542-5196\(18\)30140-2/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpla/article/PIIS2542-5196(18)30140-2/fulltext); [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3317189/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3317189/); <https://doi.org/10.17226/6034>).

Extreme temperatures affect functioning and can be particularly dangerous for vulnerable groups, such as older adults, children, and individuals with chronic health conditions. Certain populations with more exposure to the elements are at greater risk, for example, individuals who work outside or those without air conditioning in the home.

Physical health is also increasingly threatened by an increase in vector-borne disease like Lyme disease and Zika, spread by ticks and mosquitoes. Food and water systems that are affected by changing climate can contribute to exposure to toxins and contamination, which are particularly dangerous for children. Health risks are greater for individuals in communities with less access to health insurance coverage and barriers to quality health care (<https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-06/documents/ej-health-climate-change.pdf>).

## Mental Health

Preparing for, adapting to, and responding to climate events can contribute to mental health issues like chronic stress, anxiety, and depression (<https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-06/documents/ej-health-climate-change.pdf>). The mental health impacts of extreme weather events include posttraumatic stress disorder, feelings of loss and grief, and long-term emotional and social consequences. For children who experience extreme weather events, distress and anxiety can persist and affect healthy development (<https://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ea-apa-psych-report-web.pdf>).

A rise in extreme temperatures may limit the enjoyable outdoor activities that individuals take part in for emotional and physical health (<https://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ea-apa-psych-report-web.pdf>). For certain populations, such as farmers and agricultural workers, climate change can have a direct effect on employment and economic stability. New studies have linked stress, depression, and suicide with higher temperatures and predict that suicide rates are likely to rise with global warming ([www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0222-x](http://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0222-x)).

## Community Level

The incidence of extreme weather events like hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods is increasing, and a warmer climate will bring stronger, more frequent storms. In addition to physical health risks and lingering mental health consequences, these events strain community resources. Natural disasters cause displacement and can affect community infrastructure.

States and cities are taking action to anticipate these events. They are establishing adaption plans, circulating information that is accessible in native languages of community members, and planning for the needs of particular communities, including people with disabilities who have specific service needs (<https://19january2017snapshot.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-06/documents/disabilities-health-climate-change.pdf>).

## Making the Connection

A safe, healthy environment is necessary for all people to thrive ([www.ifsw.org/globalisation-and-the-environment/](http://www.ifsw.org/globalisation-and-the-environment/)). In the medical field there is debate as to the ethical responsibility of health care professionals to speak out and take action regarding environmental issues that negatively affect the health of patients (<https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/issue/health-care-ethics-and-professionalism-era-climate-change>). Social workers are likely encountering situations in everyday practice that are connected with climate change. It may be appropriate for social workers to educate clients and help them understand environmental factors that contribute to their health and health issues. Some examples include a child with chronic asthma living in a city, an adult with a new onset of allergy symptoms, an older adult who experiences dehydration and heatstroke on

a summer day, and families that are displaced due to flooding or wildfires. Social workers can help make the connection between individual health issues and larger trends. Each person can connect climate trends to health conditions in a way that is personally meaningful. Research shows that a direct, tangible connection shapes opinions on climate change.

#### **Social work approaches to integrating environmental issues into practice include:**

- **Consider environmental contributors to presenting health issue.**

In relation to presenting health issues (for example, asthma, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [COPD]) consider the environmental factors that may exacerbate the condition and discuss them with the client or family. Identify accessible resources and tangible solutions to address them—for example assistance with heating and cooling indoor spaces for older adults with COPD. For children and adults with asthma, consider indoor pollution sources (such as tobacco smoke, pests) and outdoor sources. There are available resources that track outdoor air quality and can be consulted to make decisions about when and how long children play outside.

- **Encourage clients to begin the conversation with treating medical professionals.**

Medical providers are important resources to understand the physiological impact of environmental factors on health issues. Doctors, nurses, and pharmacists can provide insight on environmental triggers for specific illnesses. For parents who are managing a child's health condition, encourage them to speak with their pediatrician about the environmental impacts on health. Medications may also affect an individual's response to extreme heat and cold—prescribing physicians may clarify the risks and benefits.

- **Help families prepare for extreme weather in their community.**

Changes in weather patterns are bringing stronger, more frequent storms to areas of the country. Depending on the location, help families anticipate the effects of flooding, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, and other

natural disasters, and create safety plans. Identify community resources and connect with local institutions that may have developed disaster plans, such as schools, hospitals, and public health departments.

- **Provide supportive counseling to help clients adjust to health conditions created by environmental factors.**

Social workers assist individuals and families in recognizing, understanding, and managing health consequences of climate change. They also help clients to address health issues, environmental barriers, and build resilience.

- **Provide resources to learn and get involved.**

If individuals are interested in learning more and becoming connected to advocacy efforts, social workers can connect them to resources. Resources may include publications and reports, or advocacy groups who are engaging residents on environmental issues. Becoming involved can empower families to become engaged in developing solutions for the environment on the local, national, and global level.

### **Additional Resources**

American Lung Association 2019 State of the Air Report

[www.lung.org/our-initiatives/healthy-air/sota](http://www.lung.org/our-initiatives/healthy-air/sota)

American Medical Association: Global Climate Change and Human Health Policy

<https://policysearch.ama-assn.org/policyfinder/detail/%22climate%20change%22?uri=%2FAMADoc%2FHOD.xml%3F0-309.xml>

Citizens' Climate Lobby

<https://citizensclimatelobby.org>

Clinicians for Climate Action: State-Based Groups

- Ohio: <https://theoec.org/clean-energy/ohio-clinicians-climate-action>
- Virginia: [www.virginiaclinicians.org](http://www.virginiaclinicians.org)
- Florida: <https://states.ms2ch.org/fl/fcca>

Fourth National Climate Assessment

<https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/14>

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Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change:  
United Nations Report  
[www.ipcc.ch/sr15](http://www.ipcc.ch/sr15)

International Federation of Social Workers  
Policy Statement: Globalisation and the Environment  
[www.ifsw.org/globalisation-and-the-environment](http://www.ifsw.org/globalisation-and-the-environment)

The Lancet Countdown  
[www.lancetcountdown.org/the-report/](http://www.lancetcountdown.org/the-report/)  
[www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)32594-7/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)32594-7/fulltext)

Medical Society Consortium on Climate & Health  
<https://medsocietiesforclimatehealth.org>

NASW Environmental Policy Statement  
In *Social Work Speaks* (11th ed.)  
<https://ebooks.naswpress.org/catalog/book/social-work-speaks-11th-edition>

#### NASW News Articles

- Climate change, natural disasters affect well-being  
[www.socialworkers.org/News/NASW-News/ID/59/Climate-change-natural-disasters-affect-well-being](http://www.socialworkers.org/News/NASW-News/ID/59/Climate-change-natural-disasters-affect-well-being)
- Environmental justice challenge awaits  
[www.socialworkers.org/News/NASW-News/ID/1604/Environmental-justice-challenge-awaits](http://www.socialworkers.org/News/NASW-News/ID/1604/Environmental-justice-challenge-awaits)

U.S. Call to Action on Climate, Health, and Equity:  
A Policy Action Agenda  
[https://climatehealthaction.org/media/cta\\_docs/US\\_Call\\_to\\_Action.pdf](https://climatehealthaction.org/media/cta_docs/US_Call_to_Action.pdf)



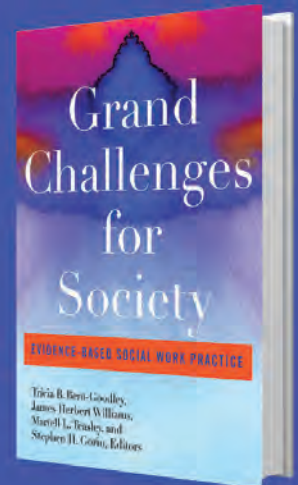
# Grand Challenges for Society

## EVIDENCE-BASED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Tricia B. Bent-Goodley, James Herbert Williams, Martell L. Teasley, and Stephen H. Gorin, Editors

**S**ocial workers face complex societal issues that often seem insurmountable. Pulled in many directions, sustainable progress can seem impossible. To help focus on what matters most, the American Academy for Social Work and Social Welfare has recently set out 12 grand challenges for social work and society, in three broad categories of individual and family well-being, social fabric, and social justice.

Social workers must strive toward social progress in these categories by relying on evidence-based methods, and the compendium of articles presented in this book highlights scholarship that provides a research base to address health disparities, social isolation, and financial capability, among others. Edited by the recent editors in chief of four NASW Press journals, *Social Work*, *Health & Social Work*, *Children & Schools*, and *Social Work Research*, this book is intended to be a primary resource for social work researchers, practitioners, policymakers, faculty, and students. *Grand Challenges for Society* not only provides the most up-to-date research, but also alerts the field to gaps in the literature that still need to be explored to achieve the aims of the Grand Challenges for Social Work.



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