

Responding to the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness: The National Homelessness Social Work Initiative

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The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare adopted ending homelessness as one of its 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work. The National Center for Excellence in Homeless Services supports this Grand Challenge through its National Homelessness Social Work Initiative. This initiative is being carried out through a consortium of schools of social work nationally, emphasizing workforce development and policy advocacy. This major, multiyear initiative applies innovative strategies to service and policy design and social work education. This article describes the overall mission of the Homelessness Initiative and key activities used to strengthen social work curriculum, expand homelessness-related field placement opportunities for students, and impact services through the policy advocacy and dissemination of best practices.

The Grand Challenge to end homelessness is 1 of 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work set forth by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) in 2015. To support the implementation of this Grand Challenge, the National Center for Excellence in Homeless Services (hereinafter, the National Center) developed collaborative, cross-sector partnerships for a National Homelessness Social Work Initiative (hereinafter, the Homelessness Initiative). This effort is carried out by a consortium that includes the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), schools of social work across the country, and a New York State school of social work liaison strategy. The Homelessness Initiative emphasizes workforce development and policy advocacy as key to the profession's ability to effectively respond to the service needs of people experiencing homelessness.

The social work profession has not had a national, systematic approach to addressing homelessness. With this Grand Challenge, we now have an opportunity to lead efforts to prevent, confront, and end homelessness (Briar-Lawson, 2015). This special issue recognizes the multifaceted needs and vulnerabilities of diverse groups experiencing or at risk for homelessness. Following a brief history of the AASWSW's Grand Challenge to End Homelessness (Henwood et al., 2015), this article describes the creation of the National Center and its major, multiyear Homelessness Initiative. Implications for social work are addressed.

Grand Challenge to End Homelessness

The Grand Challenge to End Homelessness, adopted by AASWSW, was co-authored by faculty and students from several schools of social work across the country,

along with Philip Mangano, former head of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. Mangano helped change the national conversation on homelessness from *managing* to *ending* chronic homelessness. The initial Grand Challenge concept paper (Henwood et al., 2015) focused on ending chronic and veteran homelessness through scaling up best practices, most notably Housing First (Padgett, Henwood, & Tsemberis, 2015). This decision was made based on the belief that ending chronic and veteran homelessness best met AASWSW's five criteria for a Grand Challenge: (a) the challenge must be big, important, and compelling; (b) scientific evidence indicates that the challenge can be completely or largely solved; (c) meaningful and measurable progress to address the challenge can be made in a decade; (d) the challenge is likely to generate interdisciplinary or cross-sector collaboration; and (e) the solution to the challenge requires significant innovation.

However, the challenge as adopted by AASWSW is not *just* about ending chronic and veteran homelessness and instead refers to ending all homelessness. This shift from trying to end some versus all homelessness presents both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, why would the social work profession not aim to tackle the entirety of the complex social problem of homelessness? On the other hand, ending all homelessness will require the efforts of more social workers to mobilize a larger movement. Whether meaningful and measurable progress toward ending all homelessness can be made in a decade (per the third Grand Challenge criterion) is less clear and will require prevention in addition to downstream intervention. While the Grand Challenge proposal represents an initial attempt to outline a pathway, much work remains to be done.

One approach to addressing this Grand Challenge is to scale up best practices by identifying, disseminating, and implementing effective interventions. This route has a clear pathway, is measurable, and can have impact. At the same time, we recognize that homelessness is not an isolated problem and intersects with the other Grand Challenges in our profession to ensure healthy development of all youth, close the health gap, stop family violence, advance long and productive lives, eradicate social isolation, create social responses to a changing environment, harness technology for social good, promote smart decarceration, reduce extreme economic inequality, build financial capacity for all, and achieve equal opportunity and justice. The Grand Challenge to End Homelessness may serve an integrating function, bringing opportunities to reorganize the curriculum for combined micro, mezzo, macro, and policy responses to complex issues. This approach also facilitates the engagement of faculty across categories of concern, guiding the profession toward more collaborative and integrative practices. Furthermore, building the homelessness knowledge base, from characteristics of the homeless population to policy and service translations, can advance life-changing outcomes for those who lack necessary supports.

National Center for Excellence in Homeless Services

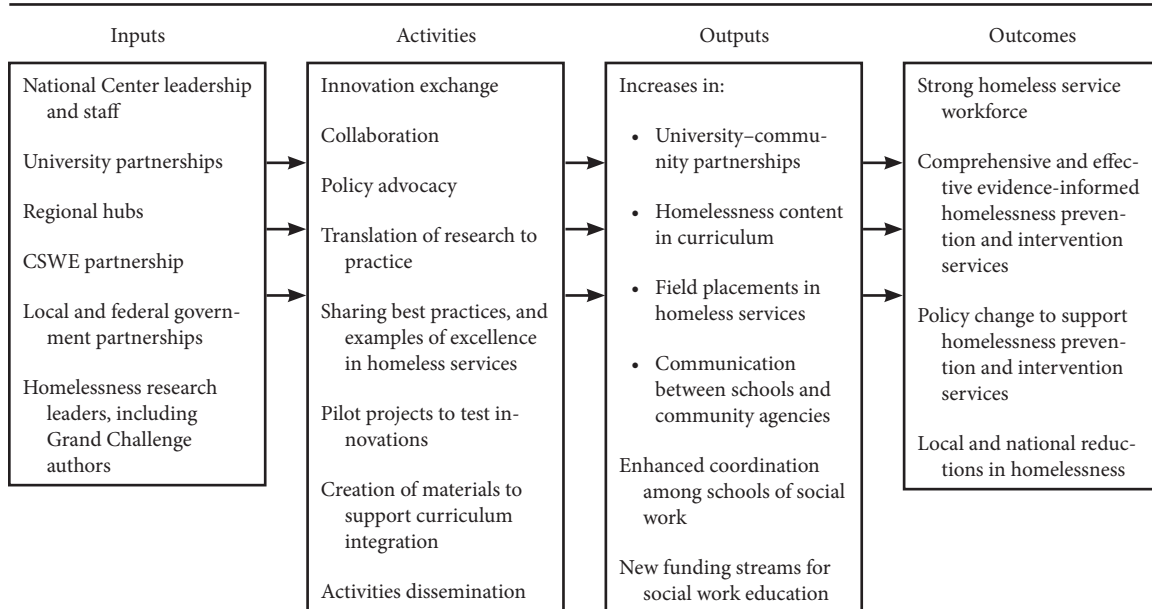
Launched in 2013, the National Center is a consortium of schools of social work throughout the United States that collaborates with service providers and policymakers to strengthen homeless services. National Center

efforts include the dissemination of culturally relevant evidence-based and emerging practices for preventing and responding to homelessness, including Housing First (Padgett et al., 2015) and Critical Time Intervention (CTI; Herman, 2013). Because of the multifaceted causes and correlates of homelessness, this work is informed by the Restorative Integral Support (RIS) model, which synthesizes research on adverse childhood experiences, resilience, and recovery into a holistic, multi-system approach that supports consumers and staff while guiding policymakers (Larkin, Beckos, & Shields, 2012).

In its launch year, the National Center emphasized social work leadership through partnerships with homeless service agencies and schools of social work nationally. Initial activities included working together to offer regional symposia for homeless service leaders and supporting local homeless service innovations. To further assist leaders in the field, the National Center offered leadership training, including guidance for policy advocacy and the use of evidence-based and emerging practices, and disseminated examples of excellence in homeless services. In this first year, the National Center did the following:

- Established formal partnerships with seven schools of social work, including California State University, Long Beach; California State University, Sacramento; the Catholic University of America; Hunter College; Indiana University; the University at Albany; and the University of Houston.
- Developed a prototype Leadership Learning Community for homeless service leaders in Northern California and acquired funding to provide a lead-

FIGURE 1. Logic model for the National Homelessness Social Work Initiative.



ership training and evaluation to members of the group and local homeless service system.

- Published a white paper on innovative funding strategies made possible under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and Medicaid expansion (Polonsky, Aykanian, Records, & Larkin, 2014).

National Homelessness Social Work Initiative

In 2015, the National Center launched the Homelessness Initiative through an investment from the New York Community Trust. The overarching aims of this initiative are to support the agenda of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to end homelessness and to engage social work programs nationally to support this effort. Aligning with AAS-WSW's implementation of the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness, the initiative emphasizes increasing homelessness curricular content, expanding field placements, engaging and educating policymakers, and supporting leaders in the homeless services field. Figure 1 presents a logic model illustrating this work.

Partnerships

The primary objective of the Homelessness Initiative is to apply academic and research knowledge directly into the field and to bring culturally relevant and diverse innovations into the social work curriculum, while advancing public policies that drive programs and practice. A key component comprises strong partnerships and collaboration. The development of the Homelessness Initiative led to a formalized partnership with CSWE, key to advancing dissemination activities, as well as increased national partnerships (see Figure 2). In addition to engaging St. Mary's College, the University of Denver, the University of Maryland, the University

of Southern California, and the University of Texas at Austin as new partner schools in 2015, the University of Alaska at Anchorage and the University of South Florida joined the initiative in 2016. Liaison relationships were developed among New York schools, and in 2016, five New York State liaison schools were selected to become full partners—Binghamton University, Nazareth College, New York University, the College at Brockport, and University at Buffalo—and Rutgers was engaged as a New Jersey liaison school.

The Homelessness Initiative also includes a regional hub model in which six schools across the nation facilitate research, practice, and policy innovations in their regions to influence the profession, advancing policies and practices to reduce homelessness. California State University, Long Beach; Hunter College; Indiana University; the University of Maryland; the University of Southern California; and the University of Texas at Austin serve as regional hub leader schools. All were selected based on their expertise and the needs of their region and are critical to advancing the National Center's mission and overall goals of the Homelessness Initiative. These schools lead in developing and strengthening local partnerships between social work programs, homeless service agencies, and policymakers toward data-driven, effective policies and programs tied to student learning opportunities.

Strengthening Curriculum

In the first year of the initiative, a wide range of activities related to curriculum development were completed. One component of this was to assess partner schools' baseline attention to homelessness in their curriculum, partnerships, and community engagement activities, including policy advocacy, training, and technical assistance. This process provided schools with a basis

FIGURE 2. National partner and New York liaison schools.

Partner Schools	NY/NJ Liaison Schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Binghamton University (SUNY) • California State University, Long Beach • California State University, Sacramento • Catholic University of America • Hunter College (CUNY) • Indiana University • Nazareth College • New York University • Saint Mary's College • The College at Brockport (SUNY) • University of Alaska, Anchorage • University at Albany (SUNY) • University at Buffalo (SUNY) • University of Denver • University of Houston • University of Maryland • University of Southern California • University of South Florida • University of Texas at Austin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daemen College • Lehman College • Long Island University • Roberts Wesleyan College • Rutgers University • Stony Brook University (SUNY) • Syracuse University • Touro College • Yeshiva University

from which to enhance each area and yielded curricular content to share with other partner and liaison schools.

Strengthening social work education will require increased attention to homelessness across the curriculum and training in evidence-based and emerging practices, including CTI (Herman, 2013). The National Center is developing several materials to support the integration of homelessness content in the social work curriculum, including a homelessness syllabus template, which will include online content and in-class activities. Additionally, an increase in the number of field placement opportunities for students to work with homeless individuals and families is seen as key to effective workforce development, allowing students to gain the necessary skills for successful work with these populations.

Policy Advocacy and Government Networking

As a policy-led and accountable initiative to strengthen the workforce by impacting policies that drive education and practice, all partner schools are making an effort to inform their regional policymaking processes. Some partners have written op-ed articles for local newspapers, which were also shared through the National Center's blog and social media. For example, two partner schools (Austin, TX, and Albany, NY) have written about the problematic criminalization of homelessness and the need to advance data-driven policies and programs for effective practice.

To support networking at the federal level, CSWE facilitated meetings between the National Center and representatives from HUD, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Homeless Veterans Initiative Office, and the Congressional Caucus on Homelessness. During the meetings, strategies for aligning efforts around shared goals to end homelessness were discussed. These meetings have led to several follow-up activities with partner schools, with pilot projects in development.

Building partnerships between schools of social work, homeless service agencies, and policymakers fosters information exchange, informs local and national policy, and supports HUD's mission of creating strong communities, increasing access to affordable housing, and using housing as a platform to improve overall quality of life. To further these efforts, schools of social work across the country are developing and strengthening local HUD relationships. For example, New York–New Jersey liaison schools were all connected with regional field office directors and directors of community planning and development in their areas.

Dissemination

Recognizing the importance of sharing accomplishments and the mission of the Homelessness Initiative, the National Center engages in a number of dissemination activities. Monthly spotlights on partner and liaison innovations are featured in CSWE's *Full Circle* newsletter. The National Center blog features spotlights, guest blog posts, and a range of posts related to homelessness and partners' work. *The National Homelessness Social Work Initiative: Partnerships for Workforce Development* was presented as a Hot Topic session at the 2015 CSWE Annual Program Meeting. In January 2016, the Society for Social Work and Research unveiled the Grand Challenges, and several partner schools participated in symposia addressing the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness. In September 2016, there will be an AASWSW conference on the implementation of the Grand Challenges that will be hosted at Washington University in St. Louis. Also, *Implementing the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness: Collaborative Practice for Collective Impact* will be offered as a "Partnership Presentation" at the 2016 CSWE Annual Program Meeting.

Emerging Policy Opportunities: Affordable Care Act

Along with the implementation of the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness, the landscape of health care policy is beginning to shift in ways that support the collaborative and coordinated strategies needed for success. Specifically, the ACA and Medicaid provide states with added flexibility and creativity in how they respond to complex problems that impact health and well-being (Aykanian & Larkin, 2015; Polonsky et al., 2014). Many homelessness advocacy, research, and policy groups have recognized this potential. Further, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (2015) offered guidance for using Medicaid to support the transition into, as well as ongoing tenure in, housing.

Under the ACA, there are significant opportunities to strengthen and expand access to high-quality homeless services and to address some of the service gaps and fragmentation that currently exist in both mainstream and homeless-specific health care (Aykanian & Larkin, 2015; Polonsky et al., 2014). The ACA prioritizes increasing access to care, improving the quality of care, and lowering overall health care costs. It also supports integrated services, coordination across providers, comprehensive preventive care, behavioral health services, and health education (Polonsky et al., 2014).

Since its inception, many ACA provisions have been, and continue to be, used to build comprehensive and effective services for people experiencing homelessness (Polonsky et al., 2014). For example, home and community-based service waivers have been used to provide case

management and other services to individuals living in supportive housing (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2012). Additionally, homeless individuals with chronic health problems can receive comprehensive care coordination through Medicaid health homes. It is also possible to include housing providers in a health home team to address homelessness and risk. In fact, the health home model has a great deal in common with the services normally included in supportive housing (Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2011; Mechanic, 2012).

Given the relative newness of the ACA, opportunities to strengthen homeless services continue to emerge. The ACA's whole person approach and focus on well-being has the potential to catapult more partners into the homeless services arena to implement complex solutions that require diverse knowledge and skills (Briar-Lawson, 2015; Polonsky et al., 2014). Social workers are uniquely positioned to develop knowledge for multifaceted policy, program, and practice solutions to ultimately end homelessness (Briar-Lawson, 2015). Thus, there are countless opportunities for the social work profession to strengthen homeless services by creating, implementing, and evaluating new models of care made possible by provisions under the ACA and Medicaid.

Workforce Development and Service Needs: Implications for Social Work

The *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (NASW, 2008) prioritizes attention to people who are oppressed, vulnerable, or poverty-stricken, with a mission to enhance both individual and societal well-being. In addition to shortages in affordable housing (Fogel, Smith, & Williamson, 2008), multiple problems contribute to homelessness, including health, mental health, substance abuse, and trauma backgrounds (Bartlett, Fogel, Garrett, & Young, 2011; Padgett, Hawkins, Abrams, & Davis, 2006). Yet, while people experiencing homelessness are at high risk across categories of concern, they remain outside of core service delivery and are not well served by categorical systems of care (Briar-Lawson, 2015; Fogel, 2016; Larkin & Records, 2007).

Although national trends show a decrease in homelessness, many states (especially New York and California) face increases in overall homelessness and in homelessness among certain subgroups, such as families and unaccompanied youth (HUD, 2015). Additionally, homeless service agencies serve ethnically and racially diverse groups with accumulated adversity who are challenged to navigate categorical systems of care. Further, agency leaders often lack resources and adequately trained staff to address co-occurring problems that can present obstacles to stable housing and employment (Larkin et al., 2012; Mullen & Leginski, 2010).

The homeless service workforce faces a variety of obstacles, such as addressing complex behavioral and medical needs, difficulties engaging clients in services, working in nontraditional settings, working across multiple service systems, burnout and compassion fatigue, and confronting negative public attitudes toward the homeless. Funding limitations also result in low-paying jobs and understaffed and underfunded programs (Mullen & Leginski, 2010). Altogether, this suggests that successfully implementing the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness will require systematic workforce development.

The scope of the Grand Challenges demands that the social work profession become a leader in program design, which requires the backbone of a strong workforce to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in society. However, social work faces an ongoing challenge to develop and support a strong workforce in areas often marginalized within the profession. Multiyear social work initiatives in aging and child welfare reveal change elements for social work education, policy, and practice: workforce development, university–agency partnerships, funding streams supporting social work education, and new service model usage (Briar-Lawson, 2014). Employing these strategies, the Homelessness Initiative emphasizes the policymaking process, local agency partnerships, curricular and field placement development, and provider support, working together with partners to identify funding streams to enhance these efforts regionally and nationally.

The lack of attention to homelessness in the social work curriculum reflects how the profession has overlooked this topic. In fact, in a 2006 survey of licensed social workers, less than 1% reported working in homeless services. However, many were working in mainstream settings likely to serve individuals and families experiencing homelessness (NASW, 2006). There is so much more that the social work profession can do to address homelessness, and the Grand Challenge guides us toward workforce development that will prepare us to lead comprehensive and collaborative approaches to reduce and ultimately eliminate homelessness.

Social workers are poised to serve as local design leaders in new community-based care systems that include family-centered care teams with behavioral and medical health, along with peer support (Briar-Lawson, 2014). Recent policy developments, such as the ACA and Medicaid expansion, create opportunities to strengthen homeless services (Aykanian & Larkin, 2015; Polonsky et al., 2014). Evidence-based practices, such as Housing First and CTI, can be used to strengthen homelessness intervention and prevention efforts. Further, opportunities exist to develop cross-system and cross-sector collaboration to improve responses to homelessness and avoid punitive actions such as criminalizing

homelessness (Aykanian & Lee, 2016). Finally, there is increasing attention to the role that social networks play in homelessness and the risk behaviors engaged in by people experiencing homelessness, suggesting that existing homeless services could do more to address social support (de la Haye, Green, Kennedy, Wenzel, & Tucker, 2012; Green, Tucker, Kennedy, & Wenzel, 2013; Song & Wenzel, 2014; Wenzel, Holloway, Golinelli, Bowman, & Tucker, 2011; Wenzel, Hsu, Zhou, & Tucker, 2012).

Provision of needed leadership support by schools of social work strengthens university–agency partnerships for translation of knowledge into practice while creating new research opportunities for faculty and expanded field experiences and curricular content for students. This in turn creates student leadership paths into the field of homelessness, with increased application of homelessness knowledge and skills. Through effective leadership, policy advocacy, and state-of-the-art service provision, there is the potential to end homelessness.

Homelessness programs are already finding creative ways to bring together services within trauma-informed and recovery-oriented contexts (Larkin et al., 2012). The social work profession has an opportunity (and ethical obligation) to learn from and share effective homelessness program examples and evidence-based practices, informing policymakers and applying social work knowledge and skills. Practice wisdom and research are key to better understanding the service needs of people who are marginally housed and homeless. This knowledge can be used to strengthen social work education and develop policy, program, and practice solutions to promote stability and improvements in functioning and well-being (Briar-Lawson, 2015).

Responding to homelessness calls for integration of micro, mezzo, macro, and policy perspectives while including and transcending existing research categories such as child welfare, mental health, disabilities, substance abuse, and aging. This leads to new conceptual frameworks that synthesize different types of data and can facilitate research on holistic interventions addressing complex issues. A person-in-environment perspective ideally prepares social work researchers to achieve this level of integration (Larkin, 2006; Larkin, Beckos, & Martin, 2014; Larkin & Records, 2007).

A whole person–whole agency–whole community–whole system approach to address trauma and other challenges that can interfere with job and housing stability combines micro and macro interventions to inform leadership, policy advocacy, and integrated services (Larkin et al., 2012; Larkin & Records, 2007). Applying the Restorative Integral Support (RIS) model, we recognize that homelessness includes many problems addressed by social workers, which offers an opportunity to integrate prevention and intervention strategies to address risks for homelessness and movement out of homelessness. Use of RIS within the curriculum helps

to integrate and translate micro, mezzo, macro, and policy research into practice (Larkin, 2006). An increase in curricular integration and infusion of homelessness content relevant to diverse racial and ethnic groups can better prepare social workers as they address the complex needs of people experiencing homelessness. The RIS framework can also be applied to integrated knowledge development (Larkin, 2014; Larkin et al., 2014).

Conclusion

The National Homelessness Social Work Initiative is engaging social work faculty, providers, and researchers across categories of concern to organize around the Grand Challenge to End Homelessness in a way that promotes a multifaceted response. In doing so, the National Center is raising awareness of the need for a more integrated approach to address curricular, practice, and research gaps in homelessness. The Homelessness Initiative continues to (a) disseminate evidence-supported and emerging practices through the curriculum, agency partnerships, and policymakers to systematize innovations; (b) strengthen homelessness curricular content and students' ability to integrate knowledge across categories of concern; (c) foster university–agency partnerships with homeless programs that improve information flow, develop leaders, influence policymakers, and increase excellence in homeless services; (d) increase homelessness internships for students; and (e) create integrated micro, mezzo, macro, and policy tracks and leadership paths for students focused on homelessness. In these ways, the Homelessness Initiative aims to develop the workforce and improve services in order to reduce and eventually eliminate homelessness. Following through on curricular, practice, and research implications, key goals of the National Homelessness Social Work Initiative over the next 2 years are to do the following:

- Expand and strengthen national social work school partnerships, working together to examine curricula, inform policy, implement innovations, and strengthen homeless service public–private sector partnerships.
- Continue to partner with CSWE as we strengthen our developing relationships with HUD, the VA, SAMHSA, and other government agencies creating partnerships to build curricula responding to real world needs, enhancing homelessness field placements for students, supporting homeless service leaders, and advancing homelessness knowledge development and translation into policy and practice.
- Support the design and leadership of regional hubs focused on curricular development and agency partnerships, shaping local and state policies for programs responding to the service needs of people experiencing homelessness (e.g., trauma-informed systems, evidence-supported interventions).

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