

The Role of Social Workers in Immigrant and Refugee Welfare

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At the time of writing, a “zero tolerance” policy intended to prosecute everyone who attempts to cross the border illegally and forcibly separate children from their parents is a national concern on the forefront of the thoughts and actions of social workers across the country. The impact of this malicious approach to immigration permeates all aspects of practice, at the heart of which are our clients. Our professional history in immigrant and refugee welfare, coupled with current policies and their potential outcomes, place social work at the center of both contention and corrective action. Correspondingly, many social workers have found themselves reexamining their role in policy and practice efforts in response to this current crisis and sequelae yet unknown.

The profession’s long history in supporting the welfare of immigrant and refugee populations was clearly established during the U.S. settlement house movement in the late 1800s. As our focus in this area continued to advance, it also became formalized within various iterations of the *Code of Ethics* and the policy statements of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). From the start, the ways in which social workers engage with immigrant and refugee policies and populations evolved to reflect the ever-changing political climate and movements of our time. Regardless of the profession’s previous contributions in this arena, recent events triggered many social workers to reconsider their current and future roles.

Once again, the profession is at the center of immigration and refugee rights and is faced with a new set of challenges with which to contend. The callous and poorly thought out zero tolerance policy was widely implemented without exception in April 2018 with the support of the White House and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. As a result, an estimated 1,995 children were separated

from their parents between April 19 and May 31 of this year (Kopan, 2018a). Attorney General Jeff Sessions defended this policy by quoting the Bible (Kopan, 2018b; Long, 2018) as a means to obscure and reframe its purpose as one of protection against cross-boarder child smuggling, thus villainizing undocumented immigrants (NASW, 2018). In response, an NASW press release urged that “Congress use its constitutional authority to insist the Trump Administration rescind this ill-conceived mandate” (NASW, 2018, last para.). NASW went on to validate its plea by citing abundant research evidence in which findings indicate that family disruptions of this nature produce enduring trauma and in turn affect a host of negative outcomes for youths (NASW, 2018).

Although President Trump continues to blame democrats for the zero tolerance policy and resulting family separation, he suspended this practice via Executive Order 13841 (2018), titled “Affording Congress an Opportunity to Address Family Separation” on June 20; subsequently, on June 26, 2018, a federal district court injunction ordered a stop to family separation and called for reunification (Jarrett, 2018). However, a few weeks later, as the deadline approached for family reunification to be completed, plans for such were poorly supported and coordinated (Collinson, 2018; Mcardle, 2018; NASW, 2018). Although Executive Order 13841 may have allayed this recent practice of family separation for the time being, it did not end the zero tolerance policy that allowed these practices to occur, nor did it address current family detainment methods. Presently, the zero tolerance policy remains in effect while the future of family detainment is uncertain.

The processes and procedures used by the Trump administration in implementing the zero tolerance policy bring attention to the role of social workers as they are among those charged to care for the

well-being of detained children separated from their parents. Upon separation, minors are transferred to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which becomes responsible for reuniting children with their families or resettling them through contracted for-profit companies and non-profit organizations (Chishti & Bolter, 2018; Cornish, 2018; Lind, 2018). Because ORR's purpose is to temporarily house undocumented children, it has historically employed social workers, psychologists, and medical professionals to attend to the children's needs while detained (HHS, Administration for Children & Families, ORR, n.d.). However, immigration lawyers contend that the Trump administration has increasingly used children's records, developed by ORR social workers and other professionals, in immigration court as evidence in determining their fate. Documentation derived by those intended to support the well-being of detained youths can result in unintended outcomes such as deportation and detainment in more restrictive settings based on noted mental or behavioral health conditions (Cornish, 2018; Lind, 2018; Nilsen, 2018). The role of social workers in ORR during this family separation crisis exemplifies the constraints, dual pressures, and frustrations felt by practitioners nationwide; those who regularly engage with immigrant and refugee populations are likely to be acutely conflicted and affected. These recent events and their aftermath challenge the profession to redefine its role in immigrant and refugee welfare in a manner that is better aligned with the current political climate. Particularly, this challenges case versus cause in a way that cannot be ignored.

Undoubtedly, the implementation and repercussions of family separation influences and informs social work practice for clients and practitioners alike. Discourse within news sources, social media, and professional circles suggests that social workers across the country are experiencing a wide range of personal and professional conflicts that are inextricably intertwined. At the center of these quandaries is the duality of social work, where micro and macro functions often operate within discrete siloes regardless of efforts to appreciate both foci within the profession (Reardon, 2012). This recent immigration policy debacle illustrates how social and political forces can exacerbate professional tensions between case and cause and the role of social work as a force for social change or social control (Hardy, 2016).

Our expertise and sustained accomplishment in promoting the welfare of immigrant and refugee populations positions social workers to lead change efforts now, while proactively preparing for challenges yet to come. As social workers remain on the frontline in both practice and policy endeavors, recent family separation practices and their implications afford an opportunity to consider our individual roles and that of the profession. These unfortunate developments have the potential to reignite focus on political action and advocacy within individual social workers, the organizations in which we practice, our research agendas, and social work education. It is not surprising that both anecdotal and objective practitioner accounts throughout settings indicate that many are newly spurred to explore their personal and professional roles. Although this editorial is not intended to offer answers, it is intended to set the stage for social workers to ask questions and seek their own resolutions. **HSW**

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DEBBIE PLATH

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