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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Advancing Social Work Education to Meet the Grand Challenge of Ending Homelessness

Benjamin F. Henwood and Amanda Aykanian, Guest Editors

The Grand Challenges for Social Work, which was initiated by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, calls on the profession to tackle some of our nation’s toughest social issues including homelessness. The Grand Challenge to End Homelessness (GC2EH) aims to expand the use of successful intervention models, develop service and technological innovations, and promote policies that increase affordable housing and income security (Henwood et al., 2016). The GC2EH’s success hinges on the abilities of schools of social work to produce graduates with the knowledge, preparation, and skills needed to accomplish these goals. This requires teaching students about evidence-based models for preventing and ending homelessness, offering field placements in homeless services to expose students to how such models are implemented in community-based settings, and providing opportunities for students to build the skills needed to effectively work with homeless clients, community members, and policy makers alike. Moreover, faculty experts in homelessness can support students interested in homelessness through mentorships and creating opportunities for students to engage in homelessness-related service, research, and policy advocacy.

This special issue illustrates how schools of social work can strengthen the curriculum, enhance field placements, and train future practitioners, scholars, advocates, and policy makers to address one of the country’s most significant and persistent social problems. Although the potential for schools of social work to align with the GC2EH is clear, there has been a dearth of empirical studies and conceptual models that address educational strategies, outcomes, and approaches for teaching students about homelessness. Thus, the primary goal of the special issue is to provide a road map for social work programs, educators, and researchers to carry out curriculum, training, and mentoring activities necessary to accomplish the grand challenge of ending homelessness.

The articles in this issue touch on social work education at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral level. Of the 13 articles, 2 offer examples of how to address existing gaps in the social work classroom curriculum. Smith-Maddox and colleagues describe a policy class designed specifically to give MSW students different frameworks and tools to address homelessness. Assignments that include a social issue report, policy brief, and advocacy campaign using social media are designed to teach students how to define the problem, understand and take on systems of oppression, and generate multiple approaches to addressing homelessness using an advocacy-practice perspective. Cronley and colleagues describe how social work programs, short of developing a specific course on homelessness, can fill gaps in the existing curriculum using diverse pedagogical strategies including course-based service learning, program evaluation, and graduate research assistantships that address homelessness.

Three articles specifically address the advantage of developing interdisciplinary curricular approaches. Bender and colleagues present a case study of a graduate seminar on addressing youth homelessness that pilots the use of human-centered design, which is an approach emerging from the fields of design, engineering, computer science, and business. Petrovitch and Navarro present feedback from social work and nursing students who participated in an innovative interprofessional education activity conducted at a day shelter serving people experiencing homelessness. Siegel and colleagues present the conceptual underpinnings of an interdisciplinary, interinstitutional
program designed to educate students in social work, medicine, law, pharmacy, public health, and nursing about systemic causes and human consequences of homelessness so that they can better provide trauma-informed, empowerment, and strengths-based care.

Two articles focus specifically on the need to develop innovative field placement programs that focus on homelessness. Aykanian and colleagues provide guidance for those interested in pursuing library-based field placements to address homelessness from three case studies from social work schools located in Maryland, New York, and Alaska. Gallup and colleagues describe a pilot program to develop new field placements in homelessness services and explicitly frame the issue around workforce development and the need to increase community capacity. They also underscore the ongoing need to evaluate such programs.

Five articles highlight the importance of university-community partnerships in addressing homelessness. Donaldson and colleagues illustrate how social work education can be used as a mechanism to build local capacity to help people suffering from chronic homelessness to gain access to income support through an evidence-based program known as SOAR (Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance Outreach, Access, and Recovery). Lery and colleagues describe how a partnership between a university and public child welfare agency and a federal demonstration project was implemented to train MSW and PhD social welfare students in a cross-sector collaboration to address family homelessness. Burns, Kwan, and Walsh describe how social work students were involved in a community-based participatory research project that engaged formerly homeless older adults in documentary filmmaking to coproduce knowledge, suggesting that broader research methods and partnerships should be incorporated into social work education to effectively address issues related to homelessness.

The two other articles that examine university-community partnerships demonstrate how a national program model that brings together individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers in one central location for a full day devoted to resource delivery and service linkages, known as Project Homeless Connect, can provide a service-learning opportunity for social work students. Jacob and colleagues present qualitative findings on how Project Homeless Connect in southern California challenged BSW student perceptions of homelessness and fostered awareness of the need to address micro and macro interventions. Similarly, Charlesworth and Metzger describe how Project Homeless Connect in Rochester, New York, provided BSW and MSW students and faculty with multiple scaffolding opportunities to learn about homelessness, which echo the findings from Jacob and colleagues.

The final article of this special issue reminds us of the challenges that many social work students may be struggling with as they seek to enter the profession. Specifically, Crutchfield and colleagues’ qualitative study examines the impact of housing and food insecurity when it is experienced first-hand by social work students and how it may be difficult for these students to seek resources because they regard themselves as helpers and not help seekers.

The intent of this special issue was to showcase examples of how schools of social work are answering the call of the GC2EH through innovations in curriculum, field placements, and other educational experiences. The 13 articles each uniquely illustrate ways to prepare future practitioners, scholars, advocates, and policy makers with the skills needed to address homelessness. This work is especially important during this time of political tension, public benefit cutbacks, affordable housing shortages, and the growing gap between housing cost and household income. We hope these examples serve as inspiration and models for school administrators interested in strengthening the way homelessness is addressed across bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral programs. We also sincerely thank the contributors for their work and their commitment to producing high-quality articles for this special issue.
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