EDITORIAL

Grand Challenges for Social Work: Research, Practice, and Education

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After four years of soliciting and refining big ideas, it’s finally official. Social work has set a 10-year course to make a significant impact on the pressing current social issues. The Grand Challenges of Social Work is a large-scale initiative to bring a focus and synergy between social work research, practice, and education to bear on a range of universal social, economic, political, environmental, and psychological problems. After fine-tuning and incorporating additional feedback from the preliminary rollout at the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) 2015 Conference, the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare (AASWSW) officially announced the 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work (GCSW) at the SSWR 2016 20th Anniversary Annual Conference in Washington, DC. I discussed the GCSW in an earlier editorial on the unification and defining of the profession (Williams, 2015). I have decided to devote another editorial to GCSW, because their introduction truly has the potential to be a defining moment in the history of our profession.

Social workers are committed to advancing a strong scientific base for our profession that would provide solutions for positive transformation to several areas of need that social workers tackle daily (AASWSW, 2015). GCSW focus on innovation, collaboration, and evidence-based programs that address social issues in a meaningful manner and can develop measurable progress for solving some of our most urgent social problems within a decade. As an honor society of distinguished scholars, practitioners, and leaders of the profession, AASWSW provided the perfect venue to coalesce a group of scholars, practitioners, and leaders to set a course to advance social work and social welfare (AASWSW, 2015). GCSW are big, important, and compelling with some scientific evidence that supports the possibility that these challenges can be largely addressed in a meaningful and measurable way in a decade (AASWSW, 2015).

At the 2016 SSWR conference in Washington, DC, the Executive Committee announced the first 12 preliminary GCSW for the coming decade. These Grand Challenges are a call to action and will serve as a focal point for social work and related disciplines to address several of the challenges affecting our quality of life. The following are the underlying problems, strategies, and goals of each of the 12 GCSW.

(1) Ensure healthy development for all youths. Millions of young people are currently treated for severe mental, emotional, or behavioral problems. A large body of literature shows us how to prevent many behavioral health problems before they emerge (AASWSW, 2016g; DeVylder, 2015; Hawkins et al., 2015; National Academy of Medicine, 2016).

(2) Close the health gap. A significant proportion of Americans have inadequate access to basic health care. This population endures the lasting effects of discrimination, poverty, and adverse environments that increase rates of illness (AASWSW, 2016d; Begun, Clapp, & The Alcohol Misuse Grand Challenge Collective, 2015; Walters et al., 2016).

(3) Stop family violence. The rates of violence perpetrated in families, among intimate partners, and on children is a significant problem in our country. Proven interventions are available to prevent and break the cycle of violence (AASWSW, 2016a; Barth, Putnam-Hornstein, Shaw, & Dickinson, 2015; Edleson, Lindhorst, & Kanuha, 2015).

(4) Advance long and productive lives. Provide fuller engagement in education and productive activities throughout the lifespan to support better health and well-being and greater security (AASWSW, 2016b; Morrow-Howell, Gonzales, Matz-Costa, & Greenfield, 2015).

(5) Eradicate social isolation. This challenge is to educate the public on the health and well-being hazards of social isolation and to promote effective interventions for social workers to address social isolation for people of all ages (AASWSW, 2016h; Lubben, Gironda, Sabbath, Kong, & Johnson, 2015).

(6) End
homelessness. The rates of homelessness among families and individuals continue to increase. Over the course of a year, it is estimated that more than 1 million Americans will experience homelessness for at least one night. The challenge is to identify and expand proven interventions to implement in communities and to adopt meaningful policies that promote affordable housing and basic income security (AASWSW, 2016f; Henwood et al., 2015).

(7) Create social responses to a changing environment. Environmental changes negatively affect health, and the changing global environment requires social and policy responses, innovative partnerships, community engagement, and human security interventions to strengthen individuals and communities (AASWSW, 2016e; Kemp et al., 2015). (8) Harness technology for social good. New technologies present opportunities for social and human services to reach more people and make better decisions. Harnessing technology will allow for more effective service development, planning, and delivery (ASWSW, 2016i; Berzin, Singer, & Chan, 2015; Coulton, Goege, Putnam-Hornstein, & de Haan, 2015).

(9) Promote smart decarceration. The United States incarcerates more individuals than any other country (Cherlin, 2010; Schmitt, Warner, & Gupta, 2010). There are high levels of inequities and disparities nested within these high rates of incarceration. The challenge of our profession is to develop a comprehensive strategy to reduce the number of people who are imprisoned and embrace a more effective approach to public safety (AASWSW, 2016j; Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015). (10) Reduce extreme economic inequality. The extreme disparities in wealth in the United States affect the social, emotional, and economic well-being of both children and families. Reducing economic inequalities will require innovative strategies and policies (AASWSW, 2016k; Lein, Romich, & Sherraden, 2015).

(11) Build financial capability for all. A significant percentage of U.S. households are without adequate savings to meet basic living expenses for three months. Economic hardship can be reduced by implementing social policies that support income generation and providing financial literacy and access to quality affordable financial services (AASWSW, 2016c; Sherraden et al., 2015). (12) Achieve equal opportunity and justice. The history of injustices in this country affects education and employment; addressing racial and social injustices and dismantling inequalities will advance human well-being (AASWSW, 2016a; Calvo et al., 2015; Goldbach, Amaro, Vega, & Walter, 2015).

These challenges are large in scope and invite scholars, researchers, practitioners, and educators to embrace and promote them. The success of GCSW is very much dependent on all members of our profession incorporating these challenges into their work (that is, research, practice, and education). There are multiple ways that the profession can move forward with GCSW. Schools of social work can develop GCSW modules in MSW, BSW, and PhD curricula, lecture series at schools on the GCSW, national and regional conference themes supporting GCSW, national research consortia with specific foci on GCSW, and policy initiatives and advocacy on the various challenges. These are just a few examples.

The GCSW initiative is a vibrant social agenda to change the social fabric for a more just society. The tag line for GCSW is “Social Progress Powered by Science.” There is a strong emphasis on continuing to conduct high-quality research that brings effective change and that we use evidence in practice (Anastas, 2013; Brekke, 2012; Shaw, 2014). It would be very safe to conclude that as the profession monitors the overall impact of GCSW, successful outcomes of this initiative will depend on the growth and quality of our scholarship, our ability to collaborate with allied disciplines, and the ability for translation and implementation of research to practice and education.

In guiding the process, AASWSW has created a national forum and opportunities for social work researchers and practitioners to collaborate within our discipline and across other disciplines (for example, health care, criminal justice, education, legal studies, technology, and environmental science). Each of the 12 Grand Challenges are large in scope, important for the social fabric of the country, compelling, and we have scientific evidence and measurable progress indicating that these challenges could be solved. GCSW allows us to build bridges within and beyond social work. SWR

REFERENCES
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