

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

April 21, 1995

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# YEARS OF ADVOCACY

## Achievements of the Past Inspire Today's Efforts

"Advocacy is the cornerstone upon which social work is built. It is so important that it is framed in three sections of our Code of Ethics. Advocacy for individuals, communities and systems is not just a suggested activity for social workers. It's not a 'do it if you have some extra time' or a 'do it if the inequity and disparity are very great' activity. It is a requisite."

— Former NASW Executive Director Elizabeth J. Clark

By Paul R. Pace and Laetitia Clayton





Since its inception in 1955, NASW has been an advocate for social workers, social justice and social welfare. From marching for civil rights in the streets of Washington, D.C., in the 1960s to supporting marriage equality in the 2000s, the association has actively backed initiatives and legislation that promote equality for everyone, help establish social safety net programs, and elevate and protect social workers.

As NASW celebrates its 65th year this October, past NASW leaders reflect on some of the association's initiatives and what they mean for society. All of those who have been NASW leaders brought their own philosophies, skills and plans to the association. They helped form a unified effort to demand changes to social injustices—something that is once again being demanded by many Americans today.

NASW has stood for social justice because “we are the professional face of the profession,” says Gary Bailey, who was NASW’s president from 2003 to 2005.

“It’s up to us to step into spaces, conversations and territories that others are uncomfortable doing,” he says.

Nowhere is that more evident than during the Civil Rights campaigns that gained momentum in the 1950s and 60s. NASW in the late 1950s released its Goals on Public Social Policy, which publicly stated and strengthened the association's support for civil rights.

### Civil Rights and LGBTQ Rights

In 1963, the association made civil rights its No. 1 priority. It supported passage of the Civil Rights Act, which called for a new law to protect the civil rights of African Americans. NASW members and leaders also took part in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom that year. Social workers Whitney M. Young Jr., and Dorothy I. Height were march organizers. Young would later become president of NASW.

The following year, NASW held an Emergency Human Rights Assembly in Washington, D.C., where it mobilized members to urge passage of the Civil Rights Act as well as human rights reforms in social services.

“The genesis of NASW of that period shows we had to confront our own segregationist views,” Bailey says today. “I am sure it wasn’t easy. Yet, we came together to make something happen. It is part of who we are as a profession.”

In the 1970s, NASW took a stand for LGBTQ rights, and established the Task Force on Gay Issues in 1976. The board of directors subsequently formed the National Committee on Lesbian and Gay Issues in 1982. The words “bisexual” and “transgender” were added in 1996 and 2005 respectively.

NASW also supported legislation that eventually gave rights to LGBT people to marry, adopt children and serve in the military. Association chapters supported laws banning gay reparative therapy.

Bailey noted the NASW Massachusetts Chapter took on state lawmakers to reconsider its ban on LGBT people to serve as foster parents. The effort spurred support on a national level, he said.

“It’s up to us to step into spaces, conversations and territories that others are uncomfortable doing.”

GARY BAILEY, NASW  
PRESIDENT, 2003–2005

Taking time to look back on these positive efforts is vital, said Bailey. “I believe in Sankofa,” he said. “It’s a Ghanaian symbol of a bird. Its feet move forward while its head looks backward with an egg in its mouth that it is putting on its back.” The word is from the Twi language of Ghana that translates to, “Go back and get it.”

“That for me has always been representative of what organizations need to do,” Bailey said. “You need to celebrate your history to inform you of what you have done, which is energizing.”

## Women's Rights

Also in the 70s, NASW launched the National Committee on Women's Issues (NCOWI) to develop, promote and/or collaborate on methods to ensure women's issues were included in NASW policies and programs.

For former NASW President Jeane Anastas (2012-2014), women's issues were an important focus during her leadership. In 2013, she organized a panel of female leaders and advocates to meet in Washington, D.C., to re-examine the term "Feminization of Poverty," which was first coined by social worker Diana Pearce in 1978. The event included speakers Gloria Steinem and Heidi Hartmann.

"We have come a long way but we also have a long way to go," Anastas said, "as shown by the persistent gender inequities in pay and working conditions in social work itself—despite the fact that most social workers and most NASW members are women."

Social work was created by women who used different methods of helping individuals and families and who influenced policy at agency, local and national levels, she said.

"Like their sisters in the Black community, they founded organizations and institutions to aid those in their communities," Anastas said. "They all held social justice, especially for the poor and other marginalized people, to be core to the mission of the profession."

## Advocating for Social Workers

For more than two decades, Richard L. Edwards served NASW as a chapter president, Delegate Assembly representative, and a member of various NASW national committees. He also served as NASW president from 1989 to 1991.

During that time, NASW effectively advocated for legal recognition for the social work profession in all 50 states, and for social work to be recognized for third-party reimbursement in federal, state and private insurance programs, he said.

Edwards also witnessed NASW develop a plan for single-payer national health insurance, which was introduced into Congress.

"While that plan was not enacted into law, I believe NASW's leadership on this issue played a role in raising awareness of the idea of national health insurance, which in coalition with many other organizations, helped lay the groundwork for what ultimately became the Affordable Care Act," Edwards said.

"As we confront the future, while currently grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial injustice that permeates our society, I think it is extremely important for NASW to be a strong voice on health and mental health issues, on domestic violence and child

## NASW Through the Years

NASW and its members have had many positive impacts on society and the social work profession over the past 65 years. These are just some of the examples:

1955



**NASW is established** when seven social work organizations merge. Later that same year, the association publishes its first issue of the **NASW News**.

1956



NASW launches the **Social Work Journal**, and eventually publishes five different scholarly journals.

NASW holds its first **Delegate Assembly** and its first **national conference**, in St. Louis.

1960



NASW adopts its first **Code of Ethics** for the profession.

1963



NASW establishes National **Social Work Month** in March.

The association's board of directors adopts a **resolution supporting civil rights**, and in July of that year it becomes NASW's No. 1 priority. NASW participates in the **March on Washington** for Jobs and Freedom.

1964



NASW pushes for passage of the **Civil Rights Act**. Social worker Whitney Young, who was the executive director of the Urban League, receives a pen from President Lyndon B. Johnson at the signing of the bill. Young becomes NASW's president in 1969.

1965



NASW supports the passage of **Medicare**, and the association's Washington representative, **Harold Hagen**, is invited to the signing of Medicare into law.

The national **Voting Rights Act** becomes law with NASW support.



**1968** Wilbur Cohen, a social worker and economist who helped found NASW, is appointed **secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.**

**1972** NASW launches its **Legal Defense Fund.**

**1975** NASW forms two national committees: one on **Women's Issues** and one on **Racial and Ethnic Diversity.**

**1976** NASW creates a **Task Force on Gay Issues.**

NASW creates **PACE**, its Political Action for Candidate Election.

**1987** NASW addresses **HIV/AIDS** by publishing the resource "AIDS: Helping Families Cope," and submits a report to the National Institute of Mental Health.

**1990** NASW launches the **NASW Press** to publish books, journals and other resources.

**1994** **The NASW Social Work Pioneers®** program is established to recognize social workers who greatly impact the profession.

**1999** NASW holds "**Dialogue on Race: Challenges and Opportunities of Diversity in the Millennium.**"

**2000** The NASW board of directors drafts a statement that **condemns "gay reparative therapy."**

**2001** NASW creates the **NASW Foundation** to help advance social work practice.

NASW develops and releases "**NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice.**"

**2004** NASW is a sponsor of the **March for Women's Lives**, to protect women's civil and reproductive rights.

**2007** NASW releases the report "**Institutional Racism and the Social Work Profession.**"

**2008** The **Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act** is introduced.

**2009** NASW backs the **Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act**, which helped gain equal pay for women. NASW CEO **Elizabeth J. Clark** is invited to the White House signing ceremony.

**2011** NASW supports the creation of the **Congressional Social Work Caucus.**

**2013** NASW is part of an amicus brief that supports the **U.S. Supreme Court Ruling to strike down the Defense of Marriage Act**, which clears the way for legalization of same-sex marriage across the U.S.

**2017** NASW organizes more than 500 social workers to participate in the **Women's March on Washington** and in sister marches across the country.

**2020** NASW quickly responds with advocacy and resources for social workers impacted by the **COVID-19 pandemic**, and is instrumental in achieving nationwide telehealth flexibility for social workers.

NASW hosts **live Town Halls to discuss racial equity**, and pledges to end racial injustice through education, practice tools and advocacy. NASW chapters lead community efforts to fight racism.

*For more on NASW's past and present initiatives and activities, visit [socialworkers.org](https://socialworkers.org). An interactive timeline developed for the association's 60th anniversary is at: [socialworkers.org/events/celebrations/NASW-60th-Anniversary](https://socialworkers.org/events/celebrations/NASW-60th-Anniversary)*



abuse issues, and that we be a leader in the fight for voting rights and the movement toward social justice for all of our citizens.”

### Looking Back

Inspiration and empowerment for social workers of today might come from social workers of the past who fought for social justice and obtained some of the rights we now enjoy, says Sue Dworak-Peck, who was NASW’s president from 1987 to 1989.

“Understanding the vision that helped drive transformation would underscore how social workers proactively created change through government relations, giving testimony and lobbying, legislation, PACE (NASW Political Action for Candidate Election), speaking out, marches, publications, coalitions —what (late U.S. Rep) John Lewis would call “good trouble,” she said.

The association was able to influence storylines in a prime-time TV show to educate 30 million viewers about mental health rights and bring social injustices to the attention of the American and global public, she noted.

“A mental health right that I worked diligently to attain was parity of mental health and physical health,” Dworak-Peck said. “Although not achieved then, this early work provided the foundation for future change.”

She said she is proud to be part of a profession that stands up to social injustices.

“During my time of leadership and as a member of NASW it was, and still is, crucial that the association take a stance on civil rights, gay rights, women’s rights and mental health rights,” she said. “Why? As John Lewis reminded us, ‘We must stand up for what we believe in.’”

“Our clients, our profession, and our society need us to stand up,” Dworak-Peck said. “We have much more to accomplish and much to lose if we don’t. We must be vigilant about what has been achieved and recognize that it was created and built not by one generation but by many working together both within and outside social work.”

### Collaboration and Reorganization

Past NASW presidents Terry Mizrahi (2001-2003) and Darrell Wheeler (2014-2017) both point out that there is strength in numbers, and the profession is stronger when NASW works with other social work organizations—and when social work comes together as one profession.

Mizrahi said a goal during her tenure was “to get every social worker to be part of NASW.”

“But within that community were different homes,” she said. “A kaleidoscope was the image of my

philosophy of leadership. NASW is a very big umbrella and a kaleidoscope for all things social work. When (all are) working together, it can be beautiful. You’re never going to get everything you want from (one) home. It’s perfectly OK to form another social work organization inside of NASW and outside of NASW.”



**Social justice starts at home...we had to focus on the future generation of social work, to identify and engage future social workers.”**

**DARRELL WHEELER, NASW  
PRESIDENT, 2014-2017**

Mizrahi was NASW’s president during the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and said the tragedy led to a strengthening of NASW’s global connections. “International social work is no longer just a specialty, but it becomes the context for everything that social workers do in the U.S.,” she said of that time.

In 2002, NASW brought together 43 different social work organizations for a summit, which was the first of its kind, Mizrahi said, and something she considers one of her biggest successes as president of the association. The goal was to work together to make their visions and voices heard, realizing they could make a greater impact than if each organization tried to do it alone.

Wheeler said the goal is to be one profession, and that social workers should not divide themselves based on micro or macro work, for example. “Under the umbrella of social work, we are better able to relate to the world, our profession,” he said.

During Wheeler’s tenure as NASW president, modernization and reorganization of the association was a priority. Although the process was sometimes painful, it was necessary to build a stronger and more streamlined NASW, he said. The focus was to bring more unity and consistency to the organization.

“Social justice starts at home,” Wheeler said. “We had to focus on the future generation of social work, to identify and engage future social workers.”

He added that lessons from the past also can help present and future generations.

“Economic, racial and social injustice are (today) a public health threat,” he said. “Social work touches all of those spaces and has a history in all of those spaces.”