

1 **Disasters**

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3 **ISSUE STATEMENT**

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5 The risk of widespread suffering and loss from natural and human-caused disasters is rising.

6 Disasters disrupt every aspect of individual and community life, with especially deep-cutting and

7 serious consequences for vulnerable populations. Social workers intervene where disasters occur

8 and participate in disaster preparedness activities. According to the Robert T. Stafford Disaster

9 Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, as amended by the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 (P.L.

10 106-390):

11 Major disaster means any natural catastrophe (including any hurricane, tornado, storm,

12 high water, wind driven water, tidal wave, tsunami, earthquake, volcanic eruption,

13 landslide, mudslide, snowstorm, or drought), or, regardless of cause, any fire, flood, or

14 explosion, in any part of the United States, which in the determination of the President

15 causes damage of sufficient severity and magnitude to warrant major disaster assistance

16 under this Act to supplement the efforts and available resources of States, local

17 governments, and disaster relief organizations in alleviating the damage, loss, hardship,

18 or suffering caused thereby. (Title I, §§ 102, 5122)

19 The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recognizes that social workers play a

20 critical role in supporting recovery efforts and restoring health systems and social service

21 networks to promote the resilience and well-being of impacted communities and individuals.

22 Disaster social work is concerned with the intervention in the social and physical environments

23 of individuals and groups as a means of preventing serious long-term emotional, spiritual, and

24 mental health problems after a disaster (Rogge, 2003). Through these central functions, social  
25 workers are valuable at every stage of a natural disaster. Social workers intervene before, during,  
26 and after a disaster to ensure that individuals, families, and communities prepare effectively for a  
27 potential disaster, endure the hardship of a disaster event, and receive the support they need to  
28 begin rebuilding their lives. Disaster social work is concerned with the intervention in the social  
29 and physical environments of individuals and groups as a means of preventing serious long-term  
30 emotional, spiritual, and mental health problems after a disaster (Rogge, 2003).

31         The broad range of social work practice allows social workers to provide services in a  
32 variety of settings, and social workers from all fields of practice must have knowledge and  
33 understanding about disasters and the course of recovery. Due to the increasing number and  
34 scope of disasters worldwide, multidisciplinary partnerships, training, research, and coordination  
35 of response efforts are needed. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) entered  
36 into the first of a succession of professional agreements with the American Red Cross in 1990 to  
37 facilitate social work participation in the planning, training, and provision of mental health  
38 services to disaster victims (NASW & American Red Cross, 1990). Furthermore, the NASW  
39 Foundation created a Social Work Disaster Assistance Fund to provide financial assistance to  
40 social workers affected by disasters. Donations go directly to social workers and social welfare  
41 organizations that can provide assistance to those who have suffered loss and are in need of  
42 financial or other assistance due to a disaster (NASW Foundation, n.d.).

### 43 **Preparedness**

44 Social workers play a critical role in disaster preparedness and response. Working independently  
45 and in collaboration with public health officials, nonprofits, and government agencies, social  
46 workers provide input and assistance in areas such as educating communities about hazards,

47 sharing information about policies and procedures for seeking public aid, establishing field care  
48 stations, assessing community needs, gathering and providing basic supplies, and providing  
49 mental health support. As social work is centered on helping others, professionals in the field can  
50 take on diverse roles in preparing for and responding to disasters. Although potentially not as  
51 visible or recognized as first responders in the medical field, social workers also play a vital role  
52 in assisting with emergency preparedness, disaster response, and evaluation of the long-term  
53 effects of disasters on individuals, families, and communities.

54 Social workers must advocate for policies that mitigate the impacts of climate change and  
55 respond to climate related disasters in a way that protects at-risk communities. This includes but  
56 is not limited to adopting and implementing evidence-based approaches to disaster risk  
57 reduction, developing policies targeting environmentally induced migration and population  
58 displacement, strengthening equity-oriented resilience policies, and proactively engaging  
59 marginalized communities in adaptation planning. Social workers must practice advocacy to  
60 elevate public and policy attention to the social and human dimensions of environmental change  
61 and practice engagement in addressing the underlying causes of environmental change. Scholars  
62 also note the need for care to ensure that local capacity-building efforts are not seen as  
63 replacements for macro-level policies and interventions aimed at addressing underlying  
64 sociostructural vulnerabilities (McCarthy, 2014). Social workers can exercise important policy  
65 and advocacy roles to address the disproportionate effects of environmental challenges on the  
66 world's most vulnerable individuals, groups, and communities. "The same processes that  
67 position some people to be in harm's way (i.e., living in marginal low-lying areas and having  
68 precarious, resource-based livelihoods) also limit their options for mitigation and adaptation"  
69 (Brklacich et al., 2007, p. 267).

70 Proactively preparing for a disaster of any kind can help save lives and restore  
71 communities. In this capacity, disaster management social workers dedicate a sizable portion of  
72 their bandwidth to developing plans and responses to ensure victims receive the support they  
73 need after a disaster. Because victims of disaster experience extreme disruption in their lives,  
74 social workers in disaster management must be in advanced communication with organizations  
75 that offer support in housing, food relief, career services, and grief and mental health counseling.  
76 By developing a network of resources ahead of time, social work practitioners are prepared to  
77 offer life-saving solutions and outcomes by connecting victims with the agencies who can best  
78 meet their needs.

79 One of the most effective strategies for social workers when preparing for a disaster is  
80 circulating information to potentially affected, vulnerable communities. When people are better  
81 informed on what to expect, especially through an event as life-altering as a disaster, social  
82 workers can more successfully intervene to provide necessary resources and guidance.  
83 Specifically, social workers can collaborate with community leaders to help draft equitable and  
84 safe evacuation, sheltering, and lockdown plans to best aid vulnerable community members. As  
85 these plans are developed and communicated, those who will be directly affected by  
86 unpredictable disasters will be more likely to survive and exhibit resilience.

## 87 **Response**

88 Social workers are critical components of the overall disaster response team. “Along with  
89 emergency management agencies, police and fire departments, and other organizations, social  
90 services agencies are important participants in the interorganizational efforts to respond to  
91 disasters” (Robards et al., 2000, p. 41). Clear, accurate, and up-to-date communication among  
92 responding entities must be maintained. Information must be relayed to the community rapidly

93 from trusted sources during initial disaster response. Those in need must know where to go for  
94 shelter, healthcare, supplies, or to locate a missing loved one. Processes for this rapid and  
95 reliable communication should be in place prior to a disaster.

96 Special populations may encounter more barriers to safety than others. For example,  
97 older adults or individuals with disabilities may be unable to evacuate without special  
98 assistance. Families with pets may be unwilling to abandon them to evacuate to a shelter where  
99 animals are not permitted or when there is not a viable way to travel with their animals.  
100 Members of the LGBTQIA community may be uncomfortable or even unsafe in some  
101 community shelters. Community members who do not fluently speak English or who do not  
102 have access to a working phone or internet may not be able to access safety recommendations  
103 urgently. Rural communities are likely to have less emergency management or response  
104 resources available, and whereas neighbors in close proximity are often the true “first  
105 responders” before trained personnel arrive, more spread out neighbors may be unattended for  
106 longer times.

107 During and shortly after a traumatic event, such as a disaster, stress reactions are to be  
108 expected. Individual reactions to acute mass trauma commonly include sleep disturbance,  
109 change in appetite, emotional lability, irritability, fear, separation anxiety, and/or difficulty  
110 focusing, among others. These symptoms should be met with compassion, validation, and often  
111 normalization. Social workers can respond to acute trauma reactions using Psychological First Aid  
112 (PFA), which is "an evidence-informed modular approach... designed to reduce the initial distress  
113 caused by traumatic events and to foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning and coping  
114 (Brymer et al., 2006). Symptoms may be more complicated or severe when preexisting conditions  
115 or vulnerabilities are present.

116 **Recovery**

117 Social work is not only important in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, but also in the weeks,  
118 months, and years that follow. The intense loss, stress, and challenges caused by disasters can  
119 linger or even intensify with time, due to ongoing inequity, insufficient resources, and/or  
120 resource inaccessibility. While critically important, initial volunteer offerings and donations  
121 taper off over time, but social workers remain active, providing vital treatment and services  
122 throughout recovery. Each community is unique, as is each disaster; thus, it is crucial that  
123 community leaders actively engage members of the affected community—particularly  
124 marginalized members—to guide long-term recovery, healing, and rebuilding efforts.

125 To align with social work values and ethics, social workers should pay special attention  
126 to the needs of vulnerable populations. Preexisting needs and vulnerabilities can reliably be  
127 exacerbated by disaster. People with medical or mental health challenges, children, older adults,  
128 those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or unhoused, and/or immigrants, among others  
129 are more likely to face adverse consequences. Disasters also create new needs for many. For  
130 example, food, housing, employment, and/or childcare which were not previously scarce for  
131 some may suddenly become urgent unmet needs. Undocumented immigrants may be unable to  
132 access some forms of assistance, particularly those offered through government agencies. There  
133 is often an increase in child abuse, intimate partner violence, and substance use following a  
134 disaster. These difficulties can be anticipated and should be addressed in post-disaster efforts as  
135 well as pre-disaster planning.

## 136 **POLICY STATEMENT**

137 NASW supports participation in and advocacy for programs and policies that serve individuals  
138 and communities in preparation for, response to, and long-term recovery from disaster,  
139 specifically:

- 140 ● prevention or mitigation of the adverse consequences of disaster and effective  
141 preparation for disaster by individuals, families, social networks, neighborhoods,  
142 schools, organizations, and communities, especially where vulnerable populations are  
143 concentrated
- 144 ● enhancement of the efficiency, effectiveness, orchestration, and responsiveness of  
145 disaster relief and recovery efforts to prevent exacerbation of problems related to the  
146 disaster
- 147 ● policies and procedures that provide access to disaster relief services and resources to all  
148 (including relationship rights for LGBTQIA2S+ and undocumented immigrants)
- 149 ● provision of behavioral health, care coordination, and social services to survivors in a  
150 context of normalization and empowerment, with sensitivity to the phases of disaster  
151 recovery and with understanding of the unique cultural characteristics of the affected  
152 community and its populations
- 153 ● attention to the long-term recovery phase of disasters, including the provision of mental  
154 health services and support
- 155 ● attention to the special training needs, stress management techniques, and support needs  
156 of first responders and other disaster workers
- 157 ● education of social workers and social work students in the specialized knowledge and  
158 methods of trauma response
- 159 ● continued research on the impact of disasters, effective interventions, and disaster  
160 management strategies
- 161 ● development of a cadre of well-trained, culturally competent disaster professionals  
162 committed to effective interdisciplinary and interorganizational collaboration in disaster

- 163 planning and disaster response
- 164 ● provision of accurate and effective public information on the normal phases of disaster
- 165 reaction, functional coping methods, and strategies for accessing and successfully using
- 166 the disaster assistance systems.

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