

...the power of social work



A Legacy of Peace

The Role of the Social Work Profession

By Terry Mizrahi, PhD, MSW

As I write on March 10, President Bush seems intent on going to war with Iraq. Regardless of opposition at home and abroad, regardless of setting the dangerous precedent of preemptive strikes, regardless of whether the U.N. Security Council approves, regardless of whether the case has been made that the U.S. is in imminent danger, regardless of the uncertainty of the outcome or the aftermath, regardless of the increasing hostilities that are likely to be engendered toward this country, regardless of whether thousands of Iraqi citizens (inside and outside the military) are killed, regardless of whether U.S. and other soldiers lose their lives, regardless of the economic, fiscal and social costs to our country in the form of deficits and downsizing of our domestic programs, this administration is steering our country on a violent course — all in the name of creating peace and democracy.

Why has the NASW Board of Directors taken a position against a war with Iraq? Why does NASW support this position in spite of a divided country and some division within our own profession?

NASW is speaking out because it has a long and noble history of advocating the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction — chemical, biological and nuclear, including this country's arsenal — and advocating the nonviolent

resolution of conflicts at all levels — family, community, intergroup, national and international. Our elected Delegate Assembly has passed several policies including, in 2002, a revised “Peace and Social Justice” policy and, in 1999, the “International Policy on Human Rights” that speak to our vision of a just world and the means of getting there.

We have maintained a consistent antiviolence stand in other policies, such as those on “School Violence,” “Disasters,” “Immigrants and Refugees,” “Capital Punishment and the Death Penalty” and “Cultural Competence.” NASW worked on an antiviolence campaign with funds from the United States Agency for International Development in the 1990s that produced a range of materials promoting alternative dispute-resolution and related programs.

NASW's International Committee and its representation on the steering committee of the International Federation of Social Workers give us an integral connection to colleagues in 76 other countries and to the use of international bodies, including the U.N., to maintain peace and help prevent intra- and inter-country violence.

Social workers can speak out because they are on the front lines working with people, groups and communities who directly or indirectly are

adversely affected by violence, trauma and disaster, whether natural or human-caused. Social workers put a human face on all conflicts and raise issues of costs and consequences. Social workers recognize the complexities of racial, religious, ethnic and class differences, the commitment that must be made by all sides in order to negotiate differences and manage conflicts, and the competence needed to engage in nonviolent negotiations of differences.

Social workers must resist intimidation by those who equate a pro-peace agenda with weakness or a lack of patriotism. Calling for nonviolence doesn't mean supporting Saddam Hussein; there are other methods to contain, isolate and persuade him without wreaking havoc on the Iraqi people.

With the aggressive statements and actions by the Bush administration and its supporters comes a range of related concerns. A social work colleague recently told a group that you can't have homeland security if you don't have safe homes and secure hometowns. Social workers understand that safety and security mean more than extra police, border patrols or the National Guard. We are concerned that actions by the president and Congress to prevent and stop terrorism will result in a substantial loss of civil liberties, the harassment of Arab and Muslim communities within and outside the U.S., the curtailing of individual freedoms and privacy rights and the self-censorship of the media that would limit healthy debate. In doing these things, we may lose the essence of democracy and sacrifice that this country has stood for since the Constitution with its Bill of Rights was adopted more than 200 years ago.

Jane Addams, the 1931 co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and a pioneer social worker, said, "We believe that war, seeking its end through coercion, not only interrupts but fatally reverses the process of cooperating good will, which if it has a chance, would eventually include the human family itself." I heard former President Clinton give a talk to a Hunter College audience in June 2002 on globalization and the future. He said that the world is already connected. There is no possibility for isolation or retreat, but there are two different trajectories for the future — one moving toward chaos and conflict and the other toward cooperation and consensus. Our obligation is to promote and contribute our knowledge, skill and values to the latter direction and build a legacy of peace.

On behalf of NASW's Board of Directors, I welcome your opinions and ideas. Please see our "Legacy of Peace" Web page.

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