

# Institutional Racism

THE SOCIAL  
WORK PROFESSION:  
A CALL TO ACTION

National Association of Social Workers

President's Initiative  
Weaving the Fabrics of Diversity



# **INSTITUTIONAL RACISM & THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION: A CALL TO ACTION**

## **Presidential Task Force Subcommittee – Institutional Racism**

*Elvira Craig de Silva, President, NASW*

*Vivian Jackson*

*Janlee Wong*

*Vickie Oldman*

*Luisa Lopez*

*Robert Schachter*

*Staff: Doreta Richards*

**Elvira Craig de Silva, DSW, ACSW, President**  
**Elizabeth J. Clark, PhD, ACSW, MPH, Executive Director**

National Association of Social Workers  
Washington, DC

## Introduction

Social work as a profession aims to address the impact of social problems on the lives of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. To achieve this, the members of the profession, the organizations through which they work, and the schools of social work must have the knowledge base, theories, and values to understand relevant social issues, especially for the purpose of creating positive change.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this document is to address one key and significant social issue, institutional (also known as structural) racism. Throughout this document these terms will be used interchangeably. This document will provide definitions of institutional/structural racism, clarify how it is relevant to the social work profession, and detail how it is manifested in the social systems within which social workers engage. Most importantly, this document will offer a vision for how the social work profession can address structural racism, in terms of both limiting its negative influence and creating conditions for effectuating realistic, achievable positive outcomes.

### **The Charge**

Although acknowledging the existence and pervasiveness of the forms racism may take, the emphasis here is not on whether individual social workers are engaging in biased or racist practices. The assumption is that people enter the profession with good intentions and the desire to help. Rather, the focus is on the societal, institutional, structural maintenance of racism and the social worker's role in reference to this macro-level issue. What is key is that the social work profession and the systems through which the profession has evolved historically, into the present, is part of a larger society in which policies, resources, and practices are designed to benefit some groups significantly more than others, while simultaneously denying the existence of racism as a variable, except in its most extreme forms. The responsibility of individual social workers is to recognize that structural racism plays out in their personal and professional lives and to use that awareness to ameliorate its influence in all aspects of social work practice, inclusive of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Furthermore, individual social workers have a responsibility to promote change within and among organizations, and at the societal level.

## Background

Although institutional racism as a social issue is not new to social work, its significance and centrality to the profession needs to be clarified and underscored. The need to address racism through social work education and social work practice was identified at the 2005 Social Work Congress convened by the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education, the National Association of Deans and Directors, and other cosponsoring organizations. The purpose of the congress was to choose 12 imperatives that a unified profession would dedicate itself to over the following 10 years. The 400 leaders of the profession who participated included addressing racism through education and practice in two of the imperatives:

- Address the effect of racism, other forms of oppression, social injustice, and other human rights violations through social work education and practice.
- Continuously acknowledge, recognize, confront, and address pervasive racism within social work practice at the individual, agency, and institutional levels.

(Clark et al., 2006, p.4)

Another significant basis for addressing racism is detailed in the NASW social policy statement Racism that was updated at NASW's 2005 Delegate Assembly. The fundamental point of the policy is that racism must not be tolerated. The policy specifically calls upon all social workers to continuously acknowledge, recognize and confront all forms of racism, within all of the institutions that are relevant to social work (NASW, 2006).

The immediate impetus for this document, however, came from the NASW President's Initiative Task Force on *Weaving the Fabrics of Diversity*, which NASW President Elvira Craig de Silva first convened in August 2006. The Task Force identified the decisions of the 2005 Social Work Congress and the NASW Racism policy statement (NASW, 2006) as giving the impetus for calling on the entire social work profession in the United States to take responsibility for addressing institutional racism, as it is manifested within the profession's own domain as well as in the broader society.

### A Historical Glimpse at the Concept of “Race”

*Institutional or structural racism*, defined as the social, economic, educational, and political forces or policies that operate to foster discriminatory outcomes or give preferences to members of one group over others, derives its genesis from the origins of race as a concept (Barker, 2003; Soto, 2004). *Race* as a biological fact has been invalidated by biologists and geneticists, but race as a social construct is very real. Physical traits still have meaning as markers of social race identity. It is this social race identity that confers placement in the social hierarchy of society, and thereby access to or denial of privileges, power, and wealth (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). “The status assignment based on skin color identity has evolved into complex social structures that promote a power differential between Whites and various people-of-color” (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 71). The emphasis on the use of physical features to classify and group people has its history from

the extended encounter between European and non-European peoples that began in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Discovering human beings in Asia, Africa, and the Americas who looked- and often acted- very different from themselves, Europeans concluded that these superficial differences were surely indicators of much more fundamental differences as well. This conclusion helped them to colonize, enslave, and even exterminate certain of those peoples. Europeans came to believe that races are in fact distinct and identifiable human groups; that there are systematic, inherited, biological differences among races; and that the non-White races are innately inferior to Whites-that is, to Europeans. (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998. p. 22)

In the United States, the cognitive dissonance between the values and beliefs of the Protestant founders for human rights, liberty, justice, democracy, brotherhood, and equality alongside the practice of enslavement of Africans, the making of Mexican/Mexican Americans a foreign minority in the land of their birth, and genocide of Native Americans was resolved by classifying groups of people by virtue of their physical characteristics as being not only different, but innately inferior and thereby unworthy of rights and entitlements. From the very origins of this nation, the concept of race was used to institutionalize the benefits of one group of people while denying them to other groups of people (Acuna, 1988; Gonzales, 2000; Kivel, 1995; Novas, 2003; Pinderhughes, 1989; Potapchuk, Leiderman, Bivens, & Major, 2005; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

The determination of who is or is not white in America has fluctuated over time. There have been times and places in which the Irish, Jews, Italians, and Latinos have been considered white or non-white. The changes in the U.S. Census Bureau nomenclature system over time demonstrate the fluidness in the U.S. society’s perceptions of how

people should be clustered. The categorization that had been “White/Non-White” is now a set of five major groups along with notation of national origin. Furthermore, the individual determines his or her own race and can choose more than one. The census also makes a clear demarcation between racial categories and the ethnic category of Latino/Hispanic who can be of any race (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

Contemporary United States continues to struggle with the cognitive dissonance between the espoused virtuous beliefs of this nation and its actual practices in relationship to those who are “different,” meaning “not white.” These struggles are captured in several of the terms often associated with a discussion of racism and related concepts.

## Overt Racism

**Racism** is the practice of discrimination and prejudice based on racial classification supported by the power to enforce that prejudice (Barndt, 1991; Garcia & Van Soest, 2006). **Ethnocentrism** is the view that one’s own group is the center of everything and that all things are judged based on one’s own group. **Prejudice** is the negative (or positive/idealized) attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs about an entire category of people formed without full knowledge or examination of the facts. And **discrimination** is acting on the basis of prejudice. Discrimination is often codified by laws, regulations, and rules. People experience **oppression** when they are deprived of human rights or dignity and are (or feel) powerless to do anything about it. Sometimes the negative act is in the form of **exclusion**, in which people are denied the opportunity to participate in a certain right, benefit, or privilege. Sometimes the negative act is in the form of **marginalization**, in which people find that they are on the fringe of political, social, or economic consciousness. That sense of invisibility results in decisions being made by those in power that may be harmful simply because the needs were not considered. **Assimilation** means being absorbed into the cultural tradition of the dominant society and consequently losing one’s historical identity. This is in contrast to **acculturation** in which there is an adaptation to a different culture but retention of original identity (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006; Pinderhughes, 1989; Potapchuk et al., 2005; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998; Soto, 2004; Thompson & Neville, 1999).

## **Social Work Response**

These concepts are relatively familiar to most social workers, and many view their work as addressing various aspects of these problems. As a profession, social work “has traditionally been looked to for leadership and support in altering conditions that impede human potential and dignity” (White, 1982, p. ix). Social work organizations can easily point to work that is being done to address the needs of the dispossessed, many of whom are people of color. The social work profession can look back on its history as a force for social change in our society in which the beneficiaries were and are predominantly people of color.



## Institutional Racism

Institutional racism is the manifestation of racism in social systems and institutions. It is the social, economic, educational, and political forces or policies that operate to foster discriminatory outcomes. It is the combination of policies, practices, or procedures embedded in bureaucratic structure that systematically lead to unequal outcomes for groups of people. (Barker, 2003; Brandt, 1991). In this environment disparities are often tolerated as normal rather than investigated and challenged. “These power-assigning social structures in the form of institutional racism affect the life opportunities, life-styles, and quality of life for both Whites and people-of-color. In so doing they compound, exaggerate, and distort biological and behavioral differences and reinforce misconceptions, myths, and distortions on the part of both groups about one another” (Pinderhughes, 1989, p.71). In the United States, the ethnocentric focus is still primarily a white, Anglo-Saxon protestant orientation. The standards by which things are considered valued emanate from a Eurocentric perspective. Kivel (1995) noted the following examples of institutional racism over the history of this country:

- exclusions from unions, organizations, social clubs
- seniority systems (last hired, first fired)
- income differentials
- predatory lending practices
- inferior municipal services
- admissions based on test scores
- differential education based on preconceived potential or ability
- monocultural school curricula

In each of these situations, people of color experience disadvantages that flow from one generation to another in reference to income, decision making, health status, knowledge and skill development, and quality of life. The greater loss is to the country as a whole of the talents and perspectives of a significant proportion of the population.

### The Silent Obstacle

Structural inequities have been solidified over time. The multigenerational effect of the privileges of free white people as compared with the effect of slavery, “Jim Crow” segregation, along with prejudicial immigration rules<sup>1</sup> has resulted in a set of social structures that maintain and reinforce the barriers to the attainment of maximal human potential and dignity. A strong social movement will be the most powerful approach to change. On the surface, this is a natural challenge for the social work profession to address. However, these social structures are maintained by individuals, many of whom are just trying to make a living. Their participation

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<sup>1</sup> Prejudicial immigration rules include the repatriation of Mexicans in the 1930s and 1940s that resulted in the deportation of 500,000 to 600,000 Mexicans (many of whom were American citizens) and their U.S. born children to Mexico (Acuna, 1988; Balderrama &Rodriquez, 2004; Gonzalez, 2000)

in these systems is not fueled by intention to do harm, and many are oblivious to the fact that anyone has been harmed. Some, including many social workers, believe that they are “doing good.”

The new challenge for the profession is to tackle forms of racism that are more subtle than slavery or segregation. To a large degree, the social traditions and values within the helping professions preclude active promotion of the types of racism that are overt or blatant. Many in this society, including the helping professions, denounce intentional discrimination or prejudice against a person because of that person’s membership in a certain racial group. The press for political correctness suppresses some behaviors or comments, and most people, including social workers or others in the helping professions, would not describe themselves as “racist.” Nor do they engage in forms of overt racism. However, even if every person in the world currently conducted themselves in a non-racist manner, institutional racism would still exist.

These structures are maintained, in part, by individuals who exhibit some of the more subtle forms of racism that even they would not necessarily believe in themselves. The challenge for social workers committed to change is to address both overt forms of racism and these subtle forms as they are expressed by others and themselves.

### **Subtle Types of Racism**

Three subtle types of racism are captured in the concepts of *symbolic racism*, *aversive racism*, and *micro-inequities*. ***Symbolic racism*** is expressed by those who may or may not perceive themselves as racist, but justify their negative judgment of others by asserting that the others do not abide by traditional values of the dominant group. People can perceive themselves as being fair and practicing equality by holding forth certain values, such as “individualism” or “work ethic” or “self-reliance,” and take negative action because the focal group does not share those values. So they perceive themselves as operating based on certain “objective” standards or “universal truths” rather than in opposition to the group based on their race (Durrheim & Dixon, 2004). ***Aversive racism*** is another subtle form of prejudice. People who engage in the practice see themselves as non-racists, but they will do racist things, sometimes unintentionally, or they will avoid people without overt racist intent. What they believe about themselves and will attest to is the importance of fairness, equality, and justice, but because they have been exposed to the ever-present societal racism just by living in the United States, they will reflect it in their conduct (Durrheim & Dixon, 2004; Tatum, 1997). Finally, good people can do bad things to others in ways for which there is no formal grievance, but still have negative (sometimes unintentionally) effect. This refers to *micro-aggressions* or *micro-inequities*. ***Micro-inequities*** are “those tiny, damaging characteristics of an environment, as these characteristics affect a person not of that environment. They are the comments, the work assignments, the tone of voice, the failure of acknowledgement in meetings or social

gatherings. These are not actionable violations of law or policies, but they are clear, subtle indicators of lack of respect by virtue of membership in a group” (Rowe, 1990). These are forms of racism that as members of this society we all commit. People of color may commit these acts or maintain these attitudes against other people of color. The charge is to become able to recognize them and move ourselves and others beyond them to facilitate systemic change.

## Looking into the Mirror

Two other issues must be confronted as a precondition to releasing the energy required to successfully challenge institutional racism. One is *white privilege* and the second is *internalized racism*. *White privilege* is the collection of benefits based on belonging to a group perceived to be white, when the same or similar benefits are denied to members of other groups. It is the benefit of access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society that white people receive, unconsciously or consciously, by virtue of their skin color (Kivel, 2002; McIntosh, 1988; Potapchuk et al., 2005;) In contrast, *internalized racism* is the development of ideas, beliefs, actions, and behaviors that support or collude with racism against oneself. It is the support of the supremacy and dominance of the dominant group through participation in the set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures, and ideologies that undergirds the dominating group’s power and privilege and limits the oppressed group’s own advantages (Potapchuk et al, 2005; Tatum, 1997). The challenge for white social workers and social workers of color is to confront these inhibiting forces to the work required to successfully confront institutional racism. Individuals are called upon to acknowledge that by the accident of history, they are in positions that give them advantages over others. And then, they are being asked to advocate for changes that may disadvantage themselves or their family members. Others are called upon to dare to recognize their own potential power, mourn the loss of what might have been, and marshal their energies to seek correction in society’s processes. Even those within the social work profession can be paralyzed against change because of benefits of white privilege or the blindness of internalized racism.

## **Racism and the Other Isms**

Some people discount the effect of race on the outcomes for people of color. Many would argue that the issues for people of color are more a consequence of socioeconomic status than race. What they fail to recognize is that the overrepresentation of people of color in lower socioeconomic strata is due to institutional racism that has constrained them to life circumstances that kept them in that strata. Others equate the prejudice, discrimination, and bias based on age, gender, sexual orientation, or physical ability to the negative experiences due to race. Prejudice and discrimination based on these factors do in fact cause much strife in our society. Also, issues of privilege based on these factors must be confronted as seriously as privilege by racial identification. However, the experience of people of color in each of these categories is significantly worse compared with those who are white and in these categories. Furthermore, the intolerance that was first established on the basis of race provided the template to treat in a discriminatory manner those who do not “fit.” If our society can successfully tackle its treatment of people who are “different” by virtue of the social category of race, it will have changed the manner in which it views, understands, and responds to “differentness” in other forms.

## Manifestations of Institutional Racism in Social Work

Social work as a profession historically has had to confront two sometimes complementary and sometimes competing mandates. The preamble to the NASW *Code of Ethics* begins by stating:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.... Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. (NASW, 2000, p. 1)

The profession is expected to “enhance human well-being” and also “strive to end social injustice.” The irony is that by being a “helping” profession, social work reduces the pressure on the larger society for social change. The continued marginalization of those who should or could be mobilized to act for social justice could be an unintended consequence of the profession’s “helpfulness.” The other dilemma is that success in changing the forces that promote discrimination, oppression, and poverty also changes the forces that support white privilege. NASW as a predominantly white association must acknowledge and commit to taking action against white privilege, if it is to be successful in achieving social justice for people of color.

### A Self-Assessment of the Profession

A thoughtful examination of the practice in the association, in social work organizations, in institutions, in agencies, and by individual social work practitioners would probably reveal examples of different subtle forms of racism. If the profession can understand the manifestation of the different forms of racism within the profession, it can gain a better understanding of the issues, discover strategies that work for change, and become authentic social change leaders against structural racism in a variety of societal institutions. Consider the following familiar scenarios:

- Support is given to policies and practices without analysis of the racial effect or worse.

**Scenario A.** *A program designed to reduce disproportionate confinement of youths of color in juvenile detention settings reviewed its decision-making policies. It discovered that one assessment question was sending children of color into detention with greater frequency than white children. The question was “Is there a parent available for supervision immediately after school?” In this community, most of the families of color were single-family units, in which the parent was at work immediately after school. When the question was changed to “Is there a responsible adult available for supervision immediately after school?”, the disposition patterns of that community changed.*

**Scenario B.** *A senior social worker of color, employed by a state agency to monitor mental health programs, finds that assessments of black families and children do not adequately consider the social context and family strengths. When she raises such concerns with white program leaders, she is frequently told that she is missing the clinical aspects of what is involved, even though she is an experienced clinician, herself.*

- Board leadership and membership and executive leadership and management positions are occupied predominantly by white people, even in institutions that serve predominantly populations of color.

**Scenario C.** *City X's population is 40% multicultural. The service community is 80% African American or Caribbean American. The three primary social service agencies providing services in this community have boards that are 100% white. The executive directors are white. The senior management positions are white. The front line service staff is 30% multicultural. The administrative clerks and housekeeping staff are 80% multicultural.*

**Scenario D.** *A Vietnamese social work administrator is recruited into a large family service agency to help the organization move toward becoming more diverse and multicultural. She soon finds that she is expected to address issues of diversity without the executive leadership and board members assuming greater responsibility, themselves. She finds it very difficult to express her concerns about this out of a realistic fear of being told that she is too sensitive.*

- Organizations that are led by people of color are marginalized by organizations led by members of the dominant society.

**Scenario E.** *In community Y, four social service agencies provide most of the services. A consortium of African American, Cuban, Haitian, and Puerto Rican-led community-based social service agencies wants to expand their services. The leaders of the four dominant social service agencies refuse to engage in dialogue with the consortium about partnerships. The state agency promulgates rules in the request for proposal that advantage the established agencies and disadvantages the consortium. Unless there is change these agencies will not have the opportunity to demonstrate whether they can effectively provide the appropriate services to the community. And in the current fiscal environment, they may not be able to survive as service providers.*

- Investment in the development of knowledge about people and communities of color is limited.

**Scenario F.** *State Z mandates that child welfare agencies engage in cultural and linguistic competence training. The agencies in this particular city conduct annual cultural competence training consisting of an eight-hour training session providing an overview of cultural competence and stories from four members of the community about their culture. Staff members who have been there for several years are bored after hearing the same presentation year after year. No other training is*

*provided. Staff members are not expected to develop a personal professional development plan in relationship to cultural competence. There is no programmatic effort to link with the various cultural communities on an ongoing basis.*

**Scenario G.** *A coalition of agencies approaches a school of social work to urge that curriculum better reflect the needs of the Latino community. The school's dean says that she agrees with the request but the faculty has a great deal of discretion in determining the curriculum. She did not feel she was in a position to insist on implementation of the requested changes.*

**Scenario H.** *A social worker of color who runs a program for children in foster care shared an experience in which a white clinician reported to him that an African American child's grandmother, who was the primary caregiver, was resistant to working with the agency after she had missed several appointments. The program director said that when he looked more closely at the situation, he found that the grandmother was caring for three of the child's siblings, including one who had recently required hospitalization. Instead of seeing her as resistant, he found her to be a significant asset to the child, but overextended and stressed. He concluded that the clinician did not understand the commitment of many African American families in assuming responsibility for children even when they are not the biological parents.*

- There is limited investment in creating partnerships with communities of color for program or service design, implementation, and evaluation.

**Scenario I.** *In response to the need to provide better aging services in rural communities, this social service agency has decided to expand services from its base in the major city in this southern community to satellite offices in the rural communities contiguous to the city. The executive director and management staff of the agency developed a service delivery structure after consultation with a well-respected consultant in the field. Like other social service agencies, the service population in both the city and the rural communities are predominantly African American, along with an influx of immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala but the board and executive directors are white. Part of the process included meetings with physicians and religious leaders in the rural area. Prospective consumers of the services or their families were not involved in the planning, design, or implementation. They were asked to complete a satisfaction survey at the end of service, but they had no input into the questions or analysis of the results.*

**Scenario J.** *In an effort to make family and children's services neighborhood based, a public child welfare agency awarded contracts to several established white-run nonprofit organizations with little history in the communities they were coming into. Whereas one community-based agency had a long-standing reputation for its involvement with the public schools, hospitals, police precinct, and cultural institutions in its neighborhood, the other contracted providers made little effort to develop such relationships.*

- There is preference to soften racist language so that one sees euphemisms such as, “culturally deprived” and “economically disadvantaged” rather than “culturally dispossessed” and “economically exploited” (Thompson & Neville, 1999).

**Scenario K.** *In a study being developed as background for a state legislative committee, this policy analysis group notes significant racial disparities in mental health services for the African Americans in one particular region of the state. It is a community that has received numerous complaints regarding racial profiling by police, predatory lending practices, and cross burnings. Rather than explore and discuss racism as a potential factor, they focus on the cultural orientation of the residents to use faith communities as a source of healing. They shift the focus to the residents rather than the institutions and policies.*

- Social workers of color experience micro-inequities promulgated by their white social work colleagues.

**Scenario L.** *In recent interviews with social workers of color in a major city about their experiencing bias among colleagues toward them, several reported, independently of one another, having their perspectives and concerns treated as unimportant. Significantly, all of them said that they also experienced having the same perspectives and concerns valued when expressed by a white person. One black program director said that he repeatedly reported that an air conditioning unit in a room where groups were run was broken during a hot summer, but it was not repaired until another administrator, who was white, made the report.*

- Employment criteria and credentialing requirements often create barriers for employment of social workers of color and generally do not require demonstration of the knowledge and skills required to effectively serve a culturally and linguistically diverse service population.

**Scenario M.** *Native American social workers in County A have consistently found it difficult to meet the criteria of the social work regulatory body in their state. As they pursue tutoring in preparation for the test, they are amazed at how few test items seem to relate to the issues and needs of tribal communities or best practices with this population. They despair that they are having a hard time meeting the formal criteria of the state and of obtaining social work positions to serve their community, while at the same time, the state credentialing body is not setting forth an expectation that those who are credentialed are prepared to serve their tribal community.*

**Scenario N.** *A hospital social work director terminated the employment of four social workers because they did not comply with a policy requiring all staff to pass the state’s licensing exam within one year of being hired. Each social worker had been highly evaluated. For three social workers, Spanish, Hmong, and Vietnamese were their primary languages and English was their second language. The fourth social worker, an African American, grew up in an inner-city neighborhood where*



*the quality of education was inferior to that of more affluent areas. This resulted in lower test scores throughout her life. The director said that this was a significant loss to the department and hospital, which was in a low-income and immigrant community.*

Each of these examples demonstrates the ripple effect of institutional or structural racism in our society into social work practice. The correction in each of these circumstances requires authentic efforts to name “racism” as a factor for exploration and action. The journey to effective transformation is not straightforward. The following section maps out strategies to address these issues within the profession.

## **Institutional Racism in the Social Work Profession**

### **A CALL TO ACTION**

The approaches to address institutional racism in the social work profession discussed here are not necessarily comprehensive in scope but identify some significant dimensions, including short- and long-term approaches. Strategies geared toward different levels of social organization are also needed, starting at the level of the individual professional social worker, moving to the level of social work organizations and then to social institutions that impinge on the profession and on clients and their communities. Addressing these levels are not mutually exclusive but are intertwined; they are separated out here to bring attention to the importance of each level. In the final section of this paper, the question “What can be done now?” will be addressed.

### **Long-Term Approaches**

#### Personal Growth and Professional Development

All social workers need to dedicate time to their personal growth and professional development to become and remain effective in addressing institutional racism. Whereas social workers are likely to fall along a continuum from having little professional development to being knowledgeable and effective in this area, growth and development is an ongoing process of continuous learning throughout one’s career.

Multiple elements contribute to personal growth and professional development, beginning with the recognition of the importance of institutional racism as a variable in social work and the lives of clients and the communities in which they live. Coupled with this awareness is the need to make a commitment to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to be both competent and effective.

#### Interpersonal Capacity and Collaboration

Social workers have limited capacity to address institutional racism on their own. Although individuals must assume responsibility for their own growth and development, it is essential for professional social workers to initiate discussions, both formal and informal, about the issues discussed here, with colleagues and members of the organizations within which they work. The conversations need to take place both as general discussions and in response to specific policies, practices, behaviors, and attitudes observed or planned in their professional context. This is often easier said than done, given the nature of institutional racism and that discussion is often experienced as threatening. Becoming skilled in initiating and maintaining discussions about institutional racism requires critical judgment, skill, and self-awareness that evolve over time.

## Social Work Organizations Becoming Antiracist Entities

Social work and social work–related organizations include agencies, programs, and departments that provide social work services; schools of social work; and associations such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Organizations need to move from remaining silent about, or ignoring, the manifestations of institutional racism to recognizing their existence and making a commitment to promote change.

This movement begins with the individual members of the organization engaging in their own professional development and growth while entering into interpersonal collaborations with colleagues and other members of the organization. It is essential, however, for organizational decision makers to assume leadership for addressing institutional racism and developing official goals, policies, and procedures that will enable the organization to evolve. In organizations engaged in service delivery this effort will include a commitment by boards of directors and ongoing analysis of how institutional racism can be ameliorated or reversed through programming, hiring, training, supervision, and other forms of institutional processes.

In educational institutions, effectiveness in addressing institutional racism will involve making a commitment to the incorporation of content related to institutional racism into curriculum and all forms of education. The goal is to graduate social workers who are on the road toward competency in addressing institutional racism throughout their careers. It also means examining ways in which the current curriculum promotes and supports values, beliefs, and practices that foster institutional racism and then engaging in change process as indicated. Leadership is needed from deans and directors, chairs of educational committees, as well as from admissions and field work departments and field work supervisors.

Associations such as NASW and CSWE have a special leadership role to play in assuring that the social work profession embraces a commitment to address institutional racism. NASW, CSWE and other social work organizations that sponsored the 2005 Social Work Congress have already taken an important step by adopting decade-long racism imperatives. These organizations can play a decisive role in using this document and similar tools as vehicles for encouraging recognition and commitment among their constituents on a broad scale.

## Focus on Client, Community, and Social Policy

Fundamental to addressing institutional racism is the need for professional social workers and social work–related organizations to understand the effect of racism on their clients and their communities. There is a need to better understand the relationship between the problems a client needs help with and the role of racism in the genesis of those problems, regardless of the race or socioeconomic status of the client. Social workers need to adapt

their own practice approach in consideration of these factors. Social workers also need to be attuned to the differential effect of social policies that disadvantage communities of color while benefiting others, and advocate for fairness and equity in policy decision and resource distribution.

## **What Needs To Be Done Now?**

Society cannot be changed overnight. However,

- Social workers can assume responsibility for taking action to reverse the effect of racism on services to people and communities of color.
- Social workers can take action to engage their own organizations to become antiracist organizations.
- Social workers can partake in actions large and small to challenge the institutional or structural racism in their communities and the nation at large.

Both individual initiatives and collective organized efforts officially endorsed by social work organizations are required to make this happen. NASW and its local chapters have a unique opportunity to take leadership. Opportunities for leadership also reside with schools of social work and social work service delivery organizations. Social work leaders, from CEOs and program directors to members of boards of directors, have a special obligation to address institutional racism and can do so, given their sphere of influence and ability to influence organizational decisions and structures.

The following opportunities can be taken immediately while building toward longer term and ongoing efforts:

**Recognition/Create awareness.** Efforts to address institutional racism begin with recognition of the dimensions of the problem and how it is manifested within the social work profession. It is especially critical to recognize how institutional racism is ignored through a process of denial. Only through recognition and building awareness can a commitment be made to create short- and long-term plans for institutionalizing positive change.

### **Action Steps**

1. Study NASW policies relating to institutional racism, including the policy statement in *Social Work Speaks* on “Racism” and in this document, “Institutional Racism and the Social Work Profession: A Call to Action.”
2. Become knowledgeable about the history and context of institutional racism, the relevant concepts that have been developed, and the manifestation of institutional racism in social work, both generally and locally, including within one’s own organizational setting. (See resources and references at the end of this document.)
3. Encourage colleagues, staff, and the institutions with which you are affiliated to take action steps 1 and 2 above.

**Education and Training/Build knowledge.** Participate in organized learning experiences that deepen one's understanding of institutionalized racism. Studying the dimensions of institutional racism is a beginning, but is usually insufficient to fully appreciate the nature of racism and its manifestations. Educational opportunities led by seasoned trainers in addressing racism are especially useful in understanding the dynamics of racism. As individuals and organizations acquire greater understanding, effective and sustainable activities can be developed. Educational opportunities include participation in forums, workshops, classes, discussion groups, as well as relevant readings.

#### **Action Steps**

1. Identify opportunities for classes and workshops that address racism.
2. Organize forums on institutional racism, its manifestations within social work, the nature of white privilege, and other relevant aspects of racism.
3. Allocate time for reading about institutional racism.

**Dialogue and Inclusion/Become partners and allies.** Practitioners and organizations must create opportunities for discussions between social workers of color who have experienced firsthand the effect of institutional racism and white social workers. White social workers need to listen to what their colleagues have to say about their experiences in the field and to their suggestions for practice based on their knowledge of working with clients of color. In addition, initiatives to address institutional racism need to include social workers of color in the decision-making process. Affirmative efforts must be taken to ensure that as many social workers of color as possible are participating in discussions about institutional racism and in planning activities to produce longer-term change.

White social workers can take leadership in helping other white colleagues understand the implications of white racial identity, white privilege, and the effect of racism on white people. It is important to realize that everyone is affected by racism. This is work that can more effectively be conducted by those who share the same racial identity.

#### **Action Steps**

1. Provide meaningful opportunities for social workers of color to share their perspectives on how institutional racism is manifested in social work and identify opportunities to create positive change. Issues of safety, trust, and commitment may need to be addressed to enable participation.
2. Use the opportunities provided in action step 1 above to enhance understanding among all social workers.
3. White social workers need to create opportunities for dialogue with social workers of color, based on action steps 1 and 2 above.

4. White social workers need to create opportunities for dialogue with other white social workers to explore the effect of racism and white privilege on white social workers.

**Planning/Plan for internal change.** Social work–related organizations can engage in longer-term strategic planning, identifying progressive steps that can be taken over a period of time, whether one, two, or three years, as well as envisioning what the organization would like to achieve in the longer term.

#### **Action Steps**

1. Engage in a visioning process, identifying how an organization can become a multicultural, antiracist organization.
2. Create expectations for the organization’s CEO and board of directors to lead the organization in addressing institutional racism.
3. Identify methods of accountability to ensure that planning is implemented and evaluated on a regular basis. In addressing the question “accountability to whom?” accountability should include social workers of color as well as clients and communities of color.

**Organizing for Social Change/Challenge the status quo.** Social workers and social work organizations can embark on the planned strategies to promote change at the individual, agency, community, and societal levels. The specific tasks are governed by the focus for intervention and the unique circumstances of that entity.

#### **Action Steps**

1. Prepare a racial effect analysis of policies and practices of the agency or community, so that specific policies and practices can be identified for change.
2. Identify and support champions for change within the organization and the community, by establishing partnerships with consumers, families, and leaders selected by communities as their representatives, and social work colleagues of color.
3. Establish an atmosphere of intolerance for racist conduct within the organization, system, and community.
4. Use the available resources to challenge racist policies, practices, and behavior. Invoke legal strategies such as civil rights laws and engage official monitoring and enforcement agencies to fulfill their mandates.

## Special Message to NASW Chapters

As leaders of the profession in our communities, NASW chapters and units are in a unique position to be at the forefront as role models and guides to social workers and social service agencies and organizations in this mission. NASW chapters and units should utilize this “call to action” and the long-term and immediate approaches as a guide. The specific tasks should be tailored to the circumstances of the chapter and the racial demographic and issues within the state.

### Action Steps

#### Assessment

1. Assess the diversity of chapter membership compared with the diversity of the state.
2. Assess the diversity of chapter membership compared with the diversity of social workers in the state.
3. Examine the program agenda of the chapter in terms of relevance to diverse populations in the state.

#### Planning

1. Based on the assessment, engage in self-awareness, information gathering, study, and dialogue as indicated in the previous section.
2. If necessary, engage in strategies to increase the diversity of the membership.
3. If necessary, engage in strategies to increase the voice of members of color in decision-making roles within the chapter.
4. If necessary, engage in strategies to adjust the programming to address issues of relevance to communities of color.
5. Establish a plan to transform the chapter into an antiracist organization.

#### Implementation

1. Establish programming to assist members and other social services providers to raise awareness regarding institutional racism.
2. Develop social justice strategies on behalf of and in partnership with communities of color to address structural and institutional racism.

#### Evaluation

1. Examine the degree to which the membership has become more diverse.
2. Examine the degree to which social workers of color are active participants in the chapter—committee participation, leadership roles, attendance and presentation in continuing education activities.
3. Examine the degree to which policy, practice, and behavioral changes have occurred within social service agencies.
4. Examine the degree to which social policies have changed.

## Closing Comments

*Conventional wisdom and, more recently, neoconservative ideology state that sufficient progress has been made in improving the iniquitous situation of people of color in the United States. The implementation of affirmative action policies, for example, has led a large number of Americans to believe that more than enough has been accomplished. Yet, the striking antithesis of such perceptions is that many Americans continue to exist in a social chasm, the formal causes of which are not great secret to anyone—hunger, housing, crime, illness, and lingering patterns of political and economic oppression. Without exception, this chasm is disproportionately inhabited by people of color...Racism, in its personal, professional, and institutional forms permeates the life situations of ethnic minorities—as citizens seeking to preserve their rights and as clients of social service agencies. (White, 1982, p. ix)*

More than 25 years ago, NASW embarked upon an initiative to challenge racism at the individual, organizational, and societal levels, “Color in a White Society.” The voices of social workers of color were lifted up and the association became more invested in the issues of people and communities of color. Twenty-five years later, it is clear that issues of that day continue into this day. Although there have been some changes in our society, racism in its many forms still persists. The work of the association is truly incomplete.

The association is again called on to take a leadership role in challenging the structures and practices within our society that perpetuate the systematic exclusion of people of color from vigorous participation in the potential richness of this country. The work of this day is even more challenging, because it is more subtle compared with the overt racism of segregation. However, the continued debate over affirmative action and immigration reflect the same issues with different words. The challenge for the profession is to have the courage to label racism as racism even though it is not comfortable. The challenge for the white members of the association is to acknowledge the benefits received by virtue of white privilege and still challenge the structural misalignments that have developed over time because of white privilege. The partnerships that can be developed with social workers of color and the communities of color can forge significant changes in this society. As such, we as social workers can claim our mission to help the oppressed population and achieve social justice. Let us open our eyes and ears and engage in self-study and conversation, and then let us act.



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## RESOURCES

### **Books**

#### **Selected NASW Press Publications**

Cafferty, P. S., Chestang, L. (Eds.). (1976). *The diverse society: Implications for social policy*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Carlton-LaNey, I. B. (Ed.). (2001). *African American leadership: An empowerment tradition in social welfare history*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Daly, A. (Ed.). (1998). *Workplace diversity*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Engstrom, D. W., & Piedra, L. M. (Eds.). (2006). *Our diverse society: Race and ethnicity—Implications for 21st century American society*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Ewalt, P. L., Freeman, E. M., Kirk, S. A., & Poole, D. L. (Eds.). (1996). *Multicultural issues in social work*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

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#### **From Other Publishers**

Blank, R. M., Dabady, M., Citro, C. F. (Eds.). (2004). *Measuring racial discrimination: Panel on methods for assessing discrimination*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

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## **Organizations**

This list is a sampling of organizations that are engaged in antiracist work. The presence or absence of an organization on this list is neither an endorsement nor an indictment of the work of a group by the association. Please use this list to explore options and perspectives on advancing an antiracist agenda.

### **Antiracism Team**

Archdioceses of Chicago  
Office for Racial Justice  
P.O. Box 1979  
Chicago, IL 60690-1979

### **ERASE Racism (Education, Research and Advocacy to Eliminate Racism)**

6800 Jericho Turnpike, Suite 109W  
Syosset, NY 11791-4401  
Website: [www.eraseracismny.org](http://www.eraseracismny.org)  
Email: [info@eraseracismny.org](mailto:info@eraseracismny.org)  
Tel: (516) 921-4863  
Fax: (516) 921-4866

### **National Coalition Building Institute**

1120 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 450  
Washington, DC 30036  
Website: [www.ncbi.org](http://www.ncbi.org)  
Tel: (202) 785-9400  
Fax: (202) 785-3385

### **National Multicultural Institute**

3000 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20008-2556  
Website: [www.nmci.org](http://www.nmci.org)  
Tel: (202) 483-0700  
Fax: (202) 483-5233

### **Network of Alliances Bridging Race and Ethnicity**

Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies  
1090 Vermont Avenue, NW, Suite 1100  
Washington, DC 20005-4928  
Tel: (202) 789-3500  
Fax: (202) 789-6390

**The Applied Research Center**

New York - Executive Office

[Public Affairs](#), [Journalism](#)

32 Broadway, Suite 1801

New York, NY 10004

Email: [arcny@arc.org](mailto:arcny@arc.org)

Tel: (212) 513-7925

Fax: (212) 513-1367

Oakland - Administrative Office

[Public Policy](#), [Research](#), [ColorLines](#)

900 Alice St., Suite 400

Oakland, CA 94607

Email: [arc@arc.org](mailto:arc@arc.org)

Tel: (510) 653-3415

Fax: (510) 986-1062

Chicago – Midwest Office

[Advocacy Leadership](#)

203 N. Wabash Avenue, Suite 1006

Chicago, IL 60601

Email: [jmorita@arc.org](mailto:jmorita@arc.org)

Tel: (312) 376-8234/8235

Fax: (312) 727-0411

**The National Resource Center for the Healing of Racism**

Three Riverwalk Centre

34 West Jackson Street

Battle Creek, MI 49017

Email: [info@nrchr.org](mailto:info@nrchr.org)

Tel: (269) 963-9450

Fax: (269) 963-9427

**The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond**

P.O. Box 770175

New Orleans, LA 70177

Website: [www.pisab.org](http://www.pisab.org)

Email: [tiphanie@pisab.org](mailto:tiphanie@pisab.org)

Tel: (504) 301-9292

Fax: (504) 301-9291

## **Web Links**

This list directs you to projects, documents, and interactive resources, databases, etc. The list does not imply NASW's endorsement of, or responsibility for the content.

### ***Building a Multi-Ethnic, Inclusive & Antiracist Organization: Tools for Liberation packet. 2005 (companion document for SPAN's antiracism training sessions)***

Safehouse progressive alliance for nonviolence (SPAN)

835 North Street

Boulder, CO 80304

<http://www.safehousealliance.org>

### ***Expanding the Circle: People Who Care about Ending Racism***

Center for Social Justice

489 College Street

Toronto, Ontario

<http://www.socialjustice.org>

### ***I Care's Crosspoint Antiracism***

<http://www.magenta.nl/crosspoint/us.html>

### ***Project Implicit***

<http://projectimplicit.net>

<https://implicit.harvard.edu>

### ***Race – The Power of an Illusion***

Public Broadcasting System

<http://www.pbs.org/race>

### ***Racism and Psychology***

American Psychological Association

Public Interest Directorate

750 First St. NE

Washington, DC 20002

<http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/racism/homepage.html>

### ***The Aspen Institute***

One Dupont Circle Suite 700

Washington, DC 20036

Roundtable on Community Change

Project on Structural Racism and Community Change

<http://www.aspeninstitute.org>

***The Race Matters Consortium***

Westat

2925 S. Wabash

Chicago, IL 60616

<http://www.racemattersconsortium.org>

***The Race Matters Toolkit***

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Race Matters Toolkit

701 St. Paul Street

Baltimore, MD 21202

<http://www.aecf.org/publications/racematters.htm>





National Association of Social Workers

National Association of Social Workers  
750 First Street, NE, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20002-4241  
[www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org)