



Grand Challenges
for Social Work

Social Progress Powered by Science

GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org
#Up4theChallenge

For more than a century, social workers have been building a stronger society. With social work leading the way, we doubled the number of babies who survived in the early twentieth century, lifted millions out of poverty from the Great Depression to today, and assisted people with mental illness through de-institutionalization, aftercare, treatment, and advocacy.

As always, large-scale challenges remain. Inequality. Violence. Mass incarceration. Environmental degradation. Population aging. Forging effective solutions is possible only when we unite around a bold strategic agenda for change. The Grand Challenges for Social Work define this platform. The Grand Challenges are a call for evidence-based social innovations attainable within a decade.

Twelve Grand Challenges are described below. For more information and to get involved in this critical initiative, please visit GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org

JUST SOCIETY

Achieve equal opportunity and justice.

In the United States, some groups of people have long been consigned to society's margins. Historic and current prejudice and injustice bars access to success in education and employment. Addressing racial and social injustices, deconstructing stereotypes, dismantling inequality, exposing unfair practices and accepting the super diversity of the population will advance this challenge. All of this work is critical to fostering a successful society.

Promote smart decarceration.

The United States has the world's largest proportion of people behind bars. Mass incarceration and failed rehabilitation have resulted in staggering economic and human costs. Our challenge is to develop a proactive, comprehensive, evidence-based "smart decarceration" strategy that will dramatically reduce the number of people who are imprisoned and enable the nation to embrace a more effective and just approach to public safety.

Build financial capability for all.

Nearly half of all American households are financially insecure, without adequate savings to meet basic living expenses for three months. We can significantly reduce economic hardship and the debilitating effects of poverty by adopting social policies that bolster lifelong income generation and safe retirement accounts; expand workforce training and re-training; and provide financial literacy and access to quality affordable financial services.

Reduce extreme economic inequality.

The top 1% owns nearly half of the total wealth in the U.S, while one in five children live in poverty. The consequences for health and well-being are immeasurable. We can correct the broad inequality of wealth and income through a variety of innovative means related to wages and tax benefits associated with capital gains, retirement accounts, and home ownership. Greater lifelong access to education will also provide broader economic opportunities.

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INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Ensure healthy development for all youth.

Each year, more than six million young people receive treatment for severe mental, emotional, or behavioral problems. Strong evidence shows us how to prevent many behavioral health problems before they emerge. By unleashing the power of prevention through widespread use of proven approaches, we can help all youth grow up to become healthy and productive adults.

Close the health gap.

More than 60 million Americans experience devastating one-two punches to their health — they have inadequate access to basic health care while also enduring the effects of discrimination, poverty, and dangerous environments that accelerate higher rates of illness. Innovative and evidence-based social strategies can improve health care and lead to broad gains in the health of our entire society.

Stop family violence.

Family violence is a common American tragedy. Assaults by parents, intimate partners and adult children frequently result in serious injury and even death. Such violence costs billions of dollars annually in social and criminal justice spending. Proven interventions can prevent abuse, identify abuse sooner, and help families survive and thrive by breaking the cycle of violence or finding safe alternatives.

Advance long and productive lives.

Increased automation and longevity demand new thinking by employers and employees regarding productivity. Young people are increasingly disconnected from education or work and the labor force faces significant retirements in the next decades. Throughout the lifespan, fuller engagement in education and paid and unpaid productive activities can generate a wealth of benefits, including better health and well-being, greater financial security, and a more vital society.

STRONGER SOCIAL FABRIC

Eradicate social isolation.

Social isolation is a silent killer — as dangerous to health as smoking. National and global health organizations have underscored the hidden, deadly, and pervasive hazards stemming from feeling alone and abandoned. Our challenge is to educate the public on this health hazard, encourage health and human service professionals to address social isolation, and promote effective ways to deepen social connections and community for people of all ages.

End homelessness.

During the course of a year, nearly 1.5 million Americans will experience homelessness for at least one night. Periods of homelessness often have serious and lasting effects on personal development, health, and well-being. Our challenge is to expand proven approaches that have worked in communities across the country, develop new service innovations and technologies, and adopt policies that promote affordable housing and basic income security.

Create social responses to a changing environment.

The environmental challenges reshaping contemporary societies pose profound risks to human well-being, particularly for marginalized communities. Climate change and urban development threaten health, undermine coping, and deepen existing social and environmental inequities. A changing global environment requires transformative social responses: new partnerships, deep engagement with local communities, and innovations to strengthen individual and collective assets.

Harness technology for social good.

Innovative applications of new digital technology present opportunities for social and human services to reach more people with greater impact on our most vexing social problems. These new technologies can be deployed to more strategically target social spending, speed up the development of effective programs and bring a wider array of help to more individuals and communities.

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GRAND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORK INITIATIVE

Impact Model: Scope, Products, Impacts, and Timeframes

Grand challenge: “a deeply significant problem widely recognized by the public whose solution is within our grasp in the next decade, given concentrated scientific and practical attention.”

Internal Impacts and Products

Within 12 months

Inform and engage the field about the GC (publications, presentations) and articulate *Grand Context*.

18 months

Announce and disseminate the final GCs with exemplars of prior societal impact and highlight the profession's *Grand Accomplishments*.

18 months to 5 years

- Impact the identity of social workers and social work scientists in terms of societal mission and scientific mission.
- Influence social work education, nationwide.
- Influence the substantive career directions of social work scientists, particularly those who are emerging.
- Change the professional and scientific identities of our MSW and PhD students.
- Engage our professional organizations.
- Influence social work educators and leaders



External Impacts and Products

Within 12 months

Build an Advisory Board reflecting external stakeholders and others we want to influence and/or engage.

18 months

Announce and disseminate the final GCs with exemplars of prior societal impact.

18 months to 5 years

- Improve prospective students' appreciation of social work as a powerful and meaningful profession of choice (MSW and PhD).
- Increase general public's appreciation of social work's contribution to making the world a better place.
- Influence collaborative and inter-disciplinary research agendas.
- Influence funders.
- Increase the benefactor pool.
- Influence the perception of social work from other disciplines and professions.
- Develop a scientific program.

Brings a voice to the definition of society's greatest problems

Frames a vision and achievable goals on key problems

Integrates with national agendas

Generates and tests innovative scientific solutions

Builds strategies for widespread and sustainable impact

Affects key societal problems

GRAND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORK INITIATIVE

Impact Model: Scope, Products, Impacts, and Timeframes

Grand challenge: “a deeply significant problem widely recognized by the public whose solution is within our grasp in the next decade, given concentrated scientific and practical attention.”

The Impact Model (see diagram) for the *Grand Challenges of Social Work Initiative* provides a comprehensive scheme to stimulate our thinking on how to map social work’s grand challenges. It acknowledges the complexity involved in determining the profession’s grand challenges—from how we conceptualize key problems, to how we integrate ourselves into larger efforts toward change, to how we assess our impact. The model graphically outlines scope, products and activities, timeframes, and impacts. The purpose of the model is to provide a structure to help us discover, generate, and articulate compelling grand challenges for social work.

A globe is used as the backdrop for the impact model to emphasize that, even when focusing on one country, grand challenges almost always imply world-changing impacts. The focal point of the model is scope, which involves determining the range of our perceptions, ideas, or actions concerning social work’s grand challenges. Foresight is central when it comes to scope. Foresight is about providing for, or gaining insight into, future problems and needs. Beyond identifying and understanding current problems, foresight is about looking at the current context and trends and making intelligent projections on emerging problems as well as their possible consequences.¹ While the world confronts us with urgent problems, the second dimension of grand challenges involves aspirations for change: identifying opportunities for change and locating/generating resources.

To formulate solid grand challenges for social work, we can think in terms of success scenarios. Borrowing from Keenan et. al., the visionary success scenario would outline what would be happening *in the profession of social work* within the next decade if it were operating in an effective and successful way.² (According to Keenan et. al., given the uncertainties involved, a scenario approach can “capture multiple futures.”) Finally, grand challenges suggest continuously raising vital scientific questions, but also fundamental questions about our purpose as a profession, our underlying assumptions, and the implications of our disciplinary lens.³

The impact model includes a timeframe for impacts at both the internal level (impacts within the social work profession) and the external level (impacts beyond our profession): within 12 months, 18 months, and 18 months to 5 years. Specific products and activities are outlined. On a broader level, although addressing specific problems is the goal, problem-solving from a grand challenges perspective almost always means transforming systems/structures that may be at the core of many social problems

Ultimately the objective is for social work’s internal and external impacts to converge to achieve far-reaching impact on deeply significant problems. Using the terminology of the National Academy of Engineering, we can think in terms of *the grand challenges that await social work solutions*.⁴ The last set of boxes in the diagram suggest a process to help frame social work solutions. It involves six elements.

- First, is to bring social work's voice into the multi-disciplinary conversation on the definition of deeply significant problems. This involves characterizing the problems and issues facing society (e.g., in terms of social- vs. individual-level determinants), interpreting the context, and analyzing causes and consequences. Problem definition sets the stage for all the other elements: how the most pressing issues are defined dictates the types of solutions that are entertained, the kind of world we are able to visualize. Essential to this step is determining the "grand context," that is, demographic trends and other global conditions facing contemporary society.
- Second, is to frame a vision and achievable goals concerning the problems: what we would want the world to look like. This involves framing opportunities for human development, for a healthy society, and for reaching human potential. This step also entails taking stock of, and building on, the profession's "grand accomplishments."
- Third, is to integrate ourselves within a larger discourse and efforts concerning deeply significant problems. Integration implies linkages on two levels, (a) vertically, for example, under that of the Office of the Surgeon General's "National Prevention Strategy"⁵ or the United Nations "Millennium Development Goals,"⁶ and (b) horizontally, for instance, in collaboration with existing agendas and work taking place at the community level.
- Fourth, is to generate innovative scientific solutions, but also engage in policy development and other socio-political approaches to change.
- Fifth, is to advance innovative and sustainable initiatives that will have widespread impact as we take them to scale in society.
- Sixth, we strive to affect societal problems and to create significant societal impact. Assessment and evaluation of social work's efforts would be required.

The Impact Model can help in the development and articulation of social work's Grand Challenges, which will help guide the profession's agenda for the next decade.

¹ Michael Keenan et. al. provide an in-depth discussion on the concept of foresight in relation to engineering in "Orienting international science cooperation to meet global 'grand challenges,'" *Science and Public Policy* 39 (2012): 166-177.

² Ibid.

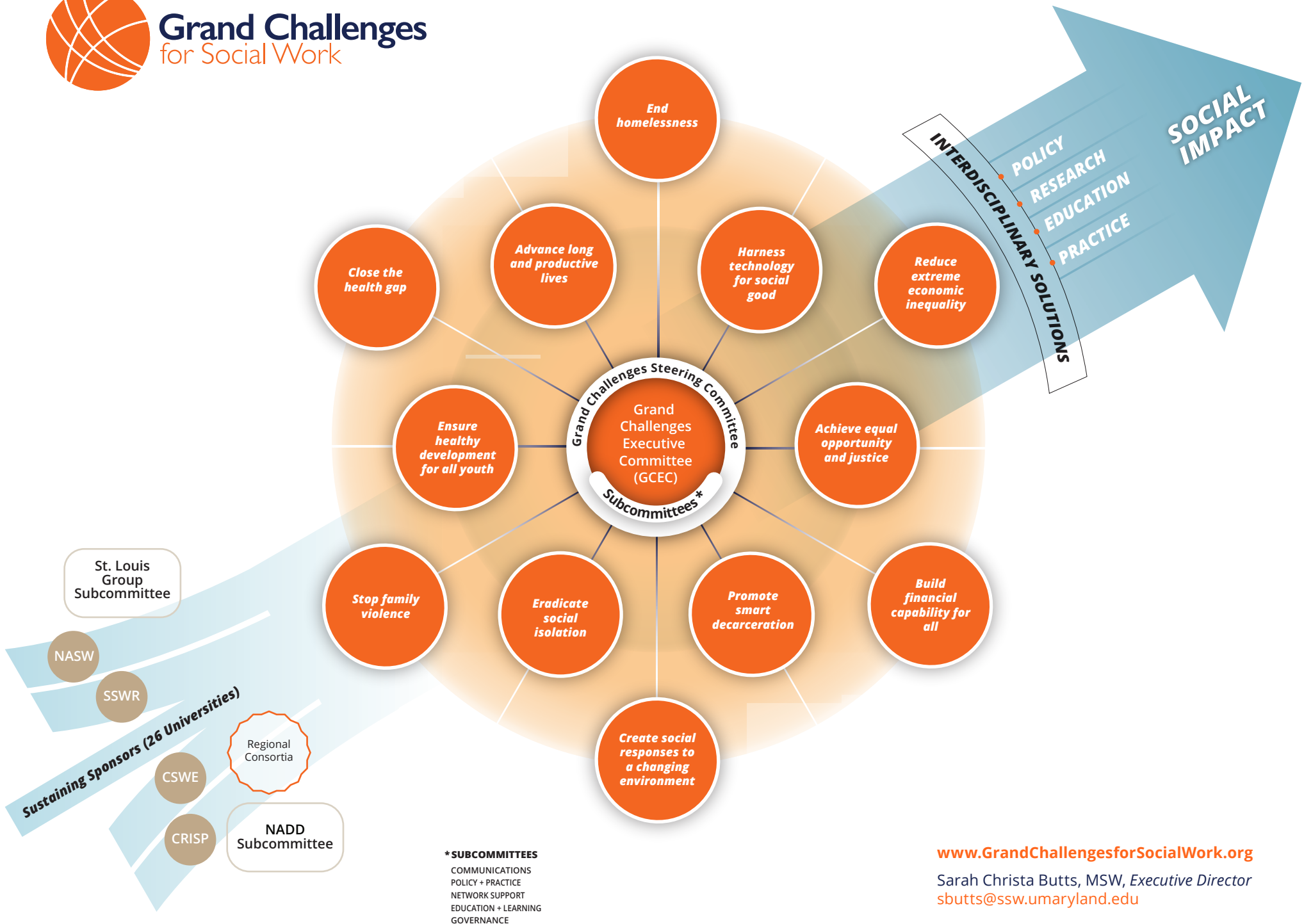
³ See: Linda Elder and Richard Paul. *The Art of Asking Essential Questions*, Foundation for Critical Thinking Press, (2009).

⁴ Grand Challenges for Engineering (<http://www.engineeringchallenges.org/>)

⁵ National Prevention Council, *National Prevention Strategy*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, 2011.

(<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/initiatives/prevention/strategy/index.html>)

⁶ "The Grand Challenges of the Gates Foundation: What Impact on Global Child Health." See also <http://www.grandchallenges.org/explorations/Pages/introduction.aspx>.





Grand Challenges for Social Work

Get Involved. Be Part of Something Bigger.

Here are some ways to get started.

The Grand Challenges for Social Work provides a unique framework for collaboration among a variety of individuals and organizations—within the field of social work and beyond—to address our society's toughest social problems. By working together in creative new ways we have the power to bring greater visibility to these critical issues, to build new knowledge, and to translate that knowledge into the practice and policy efforts that are essential to driving real, lasting, and transformative social change. Join us and be a part of this history in the making!

There are many ways to connect with GCSW!

- LinkedIn
- Facebook: @GCSocialWork
- Twitter: @GCSocialWork

- **#Up4theChallenge:** Use the hashtag in social media posts
- Newsletter & email updates: Sign up on the website!



www.GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org

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Deans & Directors

- Host/sponsor a Grand Challenges conference or symposium
- Develop a fellowship/scholarship program related to one or more GCs
- Offer courses/conduct curriculum change to reflect the GCs

- Identify & promote GC-related field education sites
- Offer a GC speaker series
- Establish awards to recognize faculty & students for GC-related teaching and research

- Connect your research to GCs in manuscripts, posters, presentations & grant proposals
- Support the GCSW by becoming a Sustaining Sponsor

Practitioners, Advocates & Policymakers

- Connect with social work researchers doing Grand Challenge-focused, cutting edge science related to your work, organization, coalition or initiative
- Engage with schools of social work, community members, & policymakers to host a policy briefing, evidence-based practice seminar, community symposia or other meeting/event related to a GC

- Lead a Practice-Based Research Network related to one or more GC areas
- Host a 'Grand Challenge Day' highlighting practitioners & organizations working on GC issues
- Apply to host undergraduate & graduate internships in GC-specific areas

Students

- Find new collaborators in groups or activities connected to one or more Grand Challenges
- Participate in one or more GC networks
- Host an #Up4theChallenge event on your campus or in your class

- Build a coalition centered on one or more GC
- Post information about your or others' GC-related work on social media using #Up4theChallenge
- Create your own GC discussion group or brown bag lunch series

Faculty Members & Researchers

- Lead or participate in a Grand Challenges network
- Incorporate GC information into your courses

- Join **Prof2Prof.com** & upload your GC-related course syllabi & teaching materials
- Connect your research to a GC in manuscripts, posters, presentations & grant proposals

- Establish Practice-Based Research Networks around GCs
- Join & collaborate with SSWR Special Interest Groups on GCs

Funders

- Encourage grantees to link their work to a specific Grand Challenge
- Support existing GC work through a direct contribution

- Create a new funding program for GC-related projects or collaborations

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This invited article introduces the concept of *grand challenges*—ambitious yet achievable goals for society that mobilize the profession, capture the public’s imagination, and require innovation and breakthroughs in science and practice to achieve (Kalil, 2012). We call for broad and deep participation of social work scientists and practitioners in the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative, which will be coordinated by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare.

New Directions for Social Work in the 21st Century

For well over a century, social workers have played a powerful role in lifting the nation out of the distress that accompanied industrial and social transformation, rapid urbanization, and economic instability. For example, between 1910 and 1921, Julia Lathrop and other social workers in the newly formed Children’s Bureau led a national research-based campaign that halved the U.S. infant mortality rate (Almgren, Kemp, & Eisinger, 2000). During the Great Depression, social workers in the federal government designed powerful, innovative New Deal programs that put millions of out-of-work Americans back to work, saving millions of families from destitution; those same efforts currently provide monthly Social Security checks to nearly 44 million people (Downey, 2010). In response to the mid-20th century’s “crisis of deinstitutionalization,” social worker Lotz and her colleagues Stein, Test, Marx, Allness, and others created the ground-breaking Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) model (Stein & Test, 1980; Test, 1998, 2012). Since that time, ACT has been used around the world to assist tens of thousands of persons with serious and persistent mental illness in making a successful transition from the psychiatric hospital ward to the community (Test, 1979). Scores of inspiring examples could be added to this list.

In the 21st century, social work faces an altered landscape in which enduring societal problems find new expression and the potential for more powerful resolution. The scale, complexity, and interrelatedness of societal problems—from poverty and dramatic inequality to the sustainability of health and human service infrastructures across the globe—demand problem-solving skill and collaboration at levels perhaps unprecedented in our history. The social work profession itself has matured, with a deeper science and knowledge base. This new era is a moment when social work can and must play a more central, transformative, and collaborative role in society, if the future is to be a bright one for all.

Consider just two examples: If we are to dramatically improve high school and college graduation rates for our nation’s most disadvantaged youth, then we must create strategies that effectively strengthen families and neighborhoods as well as promote healthy, prosocial bonds among youth, families, and schools. Community-based prevention strategies, developed principally by social work prevention scientists, offer some of our most promising vehicles for successfully meeting this national priority (Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, & Abbott, 2005). Likewise, creating an

affordable, high-quality health care system accessible to all will require combating the “upstream” social determinants of health that produce inequity (Gehlert et al., 2008), instituting effective community-based health and behavioral health promotion strategies, and creating culturally and locally tailored care-coordination practices (Andrews, Darnell, McBride, & Gehlert, 2013)—all strong focal points of the profession. The sustainability of the nation’s health care reform and the nation’s health may rest as much on the shoulders of social workers as in the hands of primary care doctors. If we are to maximize social work’s contribution to society, we must attract the world’s most passionate and gifted individuals to the profession. We must bridge the gap between the science and the practice of social work, and between social work and other disciplines and fields. We must develop effective interventions and bring those programs to scale with sustainability. In addition, we must dramatically increase the public understanding of why the science and practice of social work is crucial not only to the quality of life but also to the sustainability of our lives. Can we develop strategies to strengthen and deepen the impact of social work practice and to more effectively focus and harness our science and collective know-how? Facing similar challenges and opportunities at pivotal times in their histories, some professions and disciplines have been aided by the Grand Challenge strategy.

The Grand Challenges Strategy

The concept of the grand challenge was first introduced at the turn of the last century by the German mathematician David Hilbert (Singer & Brook, 2011). In a 1900 address to an international society of mathematicians, Hilbert presented a list of 23 unsolved “mathematical puzzles” that galvanized and focused the efforts of mathematicians for the entire century and beyond (Singer & Brook, 2001). More than 100 years later, the National Academy of Engineering (NAE) has identified the “Grand Challenges for Engineering” for the 21st century. The NAE initiative was fueled in part by several society-wide problems that became apparent in the 1990s, including the vulnerability of global computing infrastructures as reflected in the threat of worldwide Y2K computer failure. Some suggested even more important problems included the growing gulf between engineering practitioners and academics and the increasing difficulty in recruiting U.S. students, especially women, to the engineering field. The NAE convened a blue ribbon committee to draft a list of top challenges in engineering and to gather opinions from NAE members and engineers across the nation. The final list of 14 grand challenges ranged from “making solar energy economical” and “providing access to

clean water” to “reverse-engineering the brain” and “advancing personalized learning.” Prominent NAE members described the 14 Grand Challenges for Engineering as, “... [having] *the possibility of being solvable—they have the ring of things we [engineers] can and must do. But the precise path is unclear. That makes them challenging; and their deep importance makes them grand*” (Vest, 2010).

According to several NAE members and deans of engineering schools involved in the effort, in the short time since the list’s publication in 2008, the NAE Grand Challenges have transformed the field by (a) helping bridge the divide between engineering practice and research by focusing researchers’ attention on problems of major, enduring societal significance; (b) promoting awareness and appreciation of engineering among the general public; (c) reinvigorating and redirecting engineering education and research toward practical problems that require innovative solutions; and (d) inspiring a new generation of engineering students and scholars, who now define their work in terms of one or more of these challenges (O’Donnell, 2012).

The appeal of grand challenges extends far beyond the field of engineering. In the past decade, the grand challenges approach has been adopted to powerful effect by a range of national academies, foundations, and public-private partnerships as a means to inspire, align, and focus a field’s scientific and practical energy towards meeting society’s greatest needs. For example, grand challenges initiatives now exist in economic and social development, global health, chemistry, environmental sciences, and genetics and genomics. Grand challenges initiatives have been sponsored by a variety of organizations, including the Canadian Government, the United Nations, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Institutes for Health, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Although the term has been conceptualized in distinct ways by different organizations, most definitions have characterized grand challenges as:

- a delimited set (typically between 12 and 17) of high-level goals or aspirations,
- reflecting broad, integrative problems, with deeply important societal implications,
- the solutions to which are “right over the horizon”—that is, the science, technology, and knowledge needed to address the challenges are imaginable—but the path to the solution is not yet clear.

The anticipated benefits to be gained from promoting grand challenges are substantial and potentially transformative. According to a recent report from Grand Challenges Canada (Singer & Brook, 2011), grand challenges initiatives offer the following benefits:

- Provide a **compelling focus** that attracts new generations of students and scholars, drawing together talented people around important, shared, and solutions-focused goals;
- **Bring great minds to the table**, building collaborations among with world-leading scientists, practitioners, philanthropists, and public-sector partners who might not otherwise be engaged in the work;
- Provide a **platform for innovative, collaborative, interdisciplinary work**;
- **Capture the public's interest and imagination**, especially if efforts by world-leading scientists to solve pressing challenges offer compelling storylines to the media;
- **Attract new resources** by coalescing interest and investment; and
- Create a **platform for science diplomacy** and team science by bridging the divides between disciplines, silos, and ideologies.

The report also identifies several risks associated with a grand challenges approach, two of which are particularly noteworthy. First, establishing and trying to meet grand challenges initiatives places substantial demands on the time, attention, and resources of the stakeholders and organizations. Second, as with all investments in research and development, no guarantee of success exists (Singer & Brook, 2011). Failed attempts might lead to loss of momentum and further fracturing of interests within a field.

Grand Challenges for Social Work: An Initiative of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare

The development of a comprehensive Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative would be a high-risk path forward, but it would be a path with potential high payoff equal to the risk. Should social work adopt a grand challenges initiative? If so, how should such an initiative be organized? We respond to the first question with a resounding “yes.” Social work has much to gain by adopting a grand challenges framework to focus and galvanize social workers’

collective contribution to the quality of life and promotion of an equitable society in the 21st century. The societal problems that command our attention, from poverty and inequality to the sustainability of health and human services infrastructure across the globe, are exceedingly complex and addressing these problems requires the scope and scale of problem-solving strategies that grand challenges stimulate and demand.

Following the leads of successful grand challenges efforts in engineering, environmental sciences, and other fields, we believe the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) is best positioned to organize and coordinate such an effort in our field. AASWSW was established in 2009 through the collective efforts of major social work organizations, including the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education, the Society for Social Work and Research, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education, the National Association of Social Work Dean's and Directors, and the St. Louis Group for Excellence in Social Work Research and Education. The AASWSW membership includes some of social work's most accomplished scholars, educators, and leaders. The organization was created in part to lift the profession's visibility and to lead national efforts to advance the public good and contribute to a sustainable, equitable, and just future—a goal that aligns compellingly with the concept of grand challenges.

Conscious of its mission and mindful of the potential benefits and risks associated with the grand challenges strategy, the Academy has committed to leading a national Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative. As other national academies have done, the AASWSW's first step was to convene a volunteer committee to plan and lead the project. The Grand Challenge Committee includes scientists, educators, policy experts, and service program leaders from within and beyond the Academy.

The Committee's plan calls for wide input from across the profession as well as strategic partnerships with social work's national organizations, interest groups, and academic entities. Following the NAE's approach, the Committee's plan also includes the development and dissemination of material describing some of social work's greatest accomplishments from the preceding century.

GRAND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORK: PLAN OVERVIEW

Phase 1: Strategy Development

- Create national advisory board and partnerships with key social work organizations.
- Create definition of and criteria for defining social work grand challenges.
- Develop grand challenges strategies by eliciting input from individuals, groups, organizations, and campuses.
- Create strategy for systematic review of input.

Phase 2: Delineating Grand Challenges and Grand Accomplishments

- Develop and widely disseminate *Grand Accomplishments of Social Work* publications and videos.
- Encourage and elicit input on grand challenges from across the field
- Delineate grand challenges (approximately 12–14 challenges).

Phase 3: Dissemination, Diffusion, and Transformation

- Announce and widely disseminate Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative through academic and popular publications; press releases; and use of videos, social media, and other means.
- Partner with national social work organizations and groups to influence social work science, education, student recruitment, and professional identity.
- Increase public awareness and appreciation of social work and influence public funding for social work science.

In the coming months, the Committee will formally introduce its detailed plan, invite input and direction from the field, and initiate ongoing and frequent communications with social work constituencies. The Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative will be guided by a National Advisory Committee and supported by a variety of national and local social work organizations and programs. However, the success of the initiative will ultimately depend on active participation across the profession; the inclusion of diverse voices and communities; and the ability as social workers to think deeply, boldly, and creatively about the future of our society and social work's role in shaping that future.

If you have questions or ideas to share, or would like to learn more about the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative, including how you can support or participate in the project, please contact the authors or go to grandchallengesw@aswsw.org

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