



# PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL WORK

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# **Perspectives on Social Work**

Special Edition Issue

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## SPECIAL EDITION ISSUE: A Call to Action in *Perspectives on Social Work*

### EDITORIAL

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The devastation of Hurricane Harvey and its impact on the community is something from which many Houston residents are still trying to recover. Moving toward any resemblance of “normalcy” requires strength and determination at the individual, family, and community level. At the Graduate College of Social Work, that strength and determination was felt immediately as faculty and students began working together to build a network of support among each other and a rapid response to the greater community. As a result, our editorial board felt it important to document the experiences of some of our doctoral students and faculty directly involved. Each submission was reviewed internally by our editorial board and faculty chair.

Prior literature supports how individual resilience, when motivated by supportive networks, could lead to an increase in ability to manage crisis and stress during traumatic experiences (Norris et al. 2007). In this issue, there are three unique perspectives shared. We are excited to share reflections from our Dean, Dr. Alan Dettlaff, who helped to coordinate efforts that led to social work students and staff volunteering to not only help at disaster relief shelters, but to also support each other with housing, supplies, rides to campus, and emotional support (2017). Our second essay is a personal account from a fourth year doctoral student on Hurricane Harvey, the loss of her home, and its impact on her life (Webb, 2017). Our final submission is a collaborative piece submitted by two doctoral students who gathered information from conversations had with social workers who volunteered during the relief efforts. They offer insight on the call to action, the use of social work skills during disaster relief, and recommendations for practice (Zhou and Crawford, 2017).

These essays represent the core of our social work values as they intersect with real life traumatic events and the reconciliation our own vulnerabilities during those experiences. Although we acknowledge that future writings might offer empirical, evidenced-based research on the disaster, we publish this special edition to lift up the voices from our graduate college community.

Kenya R. Minott, MSW  
University of Houston  
Editor

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## Reflections on a Storm

**Alan J. Dettlaff**

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On August 25, 2017, when the University of Houston closed its campus in anticipation of Hurricane Harvey, I had no idea what was in store. Being still new to Houston, I had experienced rain and flooding, but had not yet experienced the impact of a storm of this nature. In the days that followed, it quickly became clear that we were experiencing what we now know was a historic weather event. I was personally very fortunate to live in a part of Houston that was not severely impacted by Hurricane Harvey. There was rain, but no significant flooding. However, I watched, along with the rest of the country, much of the city of Houston and its residents experience incredible devastation. Many students of the Graduate College of Social Work, and several faculty and staff, experienced significant flooding and many were forced to evacuate their homes and communities. While the extent to which personal property, including homes and other belongings, was lost among those impacted varied, the trauma experienced by all was significant. For our students, this trauma was heightened by the anxiety that already existed due to the start of the academic year, which had begun just one week prior to the storm. In the days that followed, many of our students expressed concerns about how Hurricane Harvey and the university's closure would impact their assignments, due dates, completion of field hours, and even their timeline for graduation. During this time, I found that it was most helpful to be in regular communication with our students to assure them that accommodations would be made as a result of what now would be a shortened semester. Primarily, I wanted to ensure that our students focused on their health and their safety, and not be worried about school. To this end, I am greatly appreciative of the GCSW faculty and to the administration of the University of Houston, who uniformly emphasized flexibility and understanding as our students gradually adjusted back to the routine of the academic semester once the University of Houston campus reopened on September 5, 2017.

While the devastation inflicted by Hurricane Harvey was clear, and the challenges for our students, faculty, and staff would continue throughout the semester, I was also amazed to witness the incredible heroism and grace that emerged from this historic storm. Hurricane Harvey, as devastating as it was, also shined a light upon Houston as a model for strength, resiliency, and hope. As the weeks following the storm unfolded, I was struck by

the generosity of this community and its residents, as we all came together to help those in need. Shelters were opened overnight, massive donations of food, clothing, and cash were received daily, and Houstonians were in the streets and in our neighborhoods, cleaning out houses, removing debris, and ensuring that the most vulnerable residents of the city were safe and sheltered. As the most diverse city in America, we came together to achieve our common goals, to value and seek each other's unique strengths, and to serve our neighbors and our communities in ways that showed we are all in this together. As a non-native Houstonian, I felt proud of this city and proud to call Houston my home.

Also, I was particularly proud of our students and alumni who answered the many calls for help, especially those specifically requesting social workers at the numerous shelters that had opened across the city. Our students and alumni provided much of the mental health and crisis services to those impacted by the storm and continue to do so today. In addition, our students, faculty and staff sponsored clothing drives, food drives, diaper drives, and many other activities in addition to the numerous volunteer hours they contributed to those in need.

I am also grateful to the many calls and offers of help from colleagues across the country, from schools of social work near and far. Your thoughts and messages of solidarity and concern were greatly appreciated by all of us, and I am honored to be a part of this incredibly generous social work community.

As the weeks following the storm unfolded and some sense of normalcy emerged, I am also incredibly proud of our students, faculty, and staff for diving back into the work we have committed to doing and to the outcomes we are committed to achieving. At the Graduate College of Social Work, our vision is to achieve social, racial, economic, and political justice, local to global, and Hurricane Harvey did nothing to impact our resolve and dedication to pursuing this vision. Our student-led Policy Insiders Advisory Committee hosted events focusing on hot topics in immigration policy and re-entry programs for those involved in the criminal justice system. We welcomed Jeff Hobbs to campus, author of *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*, our Social Justice Summer Reading selection, who met with students and presented to our broader social work community. We concluded the semester with an inspiring presentation from DeRay Mckesson, a national leader in the Black Lives Matter movement, followed by a student-led demonstration to "Take a Knee" to raise awareness for racial justice, abuse of power, and freedom of speech. Our students and our GCSW community faced the challenges brought by Hurricane Harvey, and responded with unwavering resolve to advance our vision, despite those challenges.

Building on our strengths and our achievements this semester, we are looking forward to continuing what is certain to be long running recovery efforts, as well as

continued opportunities to achieve our vision. Although we have all been impacted in some way, the devastation left behind by Harvey is vastly overshadowed by the selflessness and grace of Houston's residents, as well as our common resolve to move forward and to serve. At the Graduate College of Social Work, our vision is our priority, and we will continue pursuing this vision until justice is no longer an aspiration, but a reality.

**Alan J. Dettlaff** was appointed Dean of the Graduate College of Social Work and the inaugural Maconda Brown O'Connor Endowed Dean's Chair in May 2015. Prior to joining the University of Houston, Dean Dettlaff served on the faculty of the Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He received his bachelor's degree in social work from TCU, and master's in social work and PhD from the University of Texas at Arlington.

Dean Dettlaff's work focuses on improving outcomes for children and youth in the child welfare system through examining the factors contributing to racial disparities and improving cultural responsiveness. His research and consultation with state child welfare systems has led to significant policy and practice improvements that have resulted in reductions in the overrepresentation of African American children in these systems. Dean Dettlaff has also conducted groundbreaking research to identify and understand the unique needs of immigrant Latino children and families involved in child welfare.

Dean Dettlaff is co-editor of *Addressing Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in Human Services: Multisystemic Approaches and Immigrant and Refugee Children and Families: Culturally Responsive Practice*, published by Columbia University Press. He serves on the editorial boards of *Child Welfare*, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, and *Journal of Public Child Welfare*.

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## **“Home”**

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Since my house and most of its contents were destroyed by Hurricane Harvey, I have been giving a lot of thought to the word “home.” Overwhelmed as I (and my family) have been by the loss of what my brother described as “a levee of trash,” and others, less charitably, have described as “a pile of shit,” I have been a little surprised at how easy it has been to let go of all that stuff. What has been harder, has been the sense that I have lost my center, my identity, my home.

My family and my pets were safely out of town when the water rose, and we were spared the trauma of watching the water come in, or the terror of trying to evacuate with pets and children through high water in the middle of the night. Stuck in the far northern suburbs of Houston, I passed the time frenetically filling out FEMA applications, texting my neighbors, watching the news, obsessing about what we would find when we got back to town, and stocking up on supplies at the closest Wal-Mart and home improvement store. In hindsight, loading 100 pieces of sheetrock on a trailer in a downpour might not have been the most productive use of my time, but doing anything gave me a sense of control over a situation I could not even imagine.

My tenuous grip on control evaporated on Tuesday, August 29. With major roads into and within Houston still closed by high water, my contractor (the word does not begin to describe the relationship I have with this man, who was, and continues to be, my savior through all of this) called to say he had made it to my house with a team of laborers and I needed to come home. With Google flummoxed by all the high water, and challenges with cell phone reception in remote parts of the area, my son and I set out with paper maps and sporadic phone calls to another friend who was guiding our progress through rural Montgomery County with a Texas map and a strong internet connection. Although we had to make a significant detour, with no one else on the roads, our trip into Houston was much quicker than we expected, and we pulled into our neighborhood at about 4:00 pm.

Although some of the families in new homes never left, we were the first flooded family to make it back to the neighborhood, and the silence was eerie. At that time of day, our streets are usually busy with dog walkers, kids on bikes, and random people taking advantage of our tree-lined streets to get in some cardio. But on that Tuesday afternoon,



the only activity seemed to be at my house. Our neighborhood of mid-century ranch-style houses just off Brays Bayou was badly affected by the floodwaters. Every original home took on water, from just a few inches on the edges of the neighborhood, to 3-4 feet on the streets closest to the bayou. Out of 146 homes, only 20, all of them new construction, did not have any water at all. Two or three others had only garage flooding. My house had almost three feet of water enter the garage, both the lowest part of the house and the side closest to the bayou. Based on water lines on the walls and furniture, there was at least 24 inches water in every other room of the house. The workers had already emptied the refrigerators and freezer of spoiled food, and had pulled water-logged sofas and mattresses to the curb. My living room sofa, on which dozens of visitors had slept, was the first thing I saw when we pulled up.

My contractor met us at the garage and tried to prepare us for what we would see inside. "It's bad," he said. We walked slowly through the house, with my son and I trying to take in the scope of what we were seeing. Most of the water was gone, although an inch or two remained in two of the bedrooms which seemed to have tighter seals than the other rooms. Some things seemed surprisingly normal. My kitchen table was still neatly stacked with paperwork I had cleaned up before leaving the house five days earlier. The hardwood parquet floor in my den, at first glance, looked unscathed, while the hardwood floor in the living and dining room had buckled and lifted by several inches. Our 1871 piano had water marks on the legs and pedal lyre, but the keyboard and sound board seemed untouched. Cups and saucers on the bottom shelves of my china cabinet were full of dirty water, but otherwise undamaged. The china cabinet itself, however, was warped and the veneer was peeling off the lower surfaces. Bookcases, which we had in every single room of the house, were soaked with water, and on at least the bottom two shelves (and in some cases higher), the books had swollen to the point where we could not remove them. My newly renovated bathroom, finished just 10 days before the storm, looked untouched. Until I opened the bottom cabinet drawers to find 14 inches of water still covering my hair dryer and extra toilet paper. There were still several inches of standing water in my daughter's bedroom, which was strewn with the detritus left behind when she left for college the day before the storm hit, all of which was now soaked with flood waters. The guest room, which contained several family antiques, and had also been the storage spot for all of the pictures we had taken off the walls in order to paint just two weeks earlier, still had several inches of water. Miraculously, we had power and working air conditioning.

The scope of the work to be done was overwhelming, and I found myself almost paralyzed in the face of it. To my surprise, the house did not smell, but all of my other senses were bombarded. Our workers were sucking up the remaining flood waters with shop vacs, tearing out sheetrock, hardwood flooring and paneling, and hauling flooded appliances to the curb. It was noisy and chaotic. Everything we touched was slimy from the flood waters. Our job was to pack up the salvageable stuff, but at this point, it was just me and my son, and I found myself literally spinning in circles, looking around the different rooms, trying to figure out where to start. The first, almost impossible job, was deciding



what was salvageable and what was not. But this presented another challenge. I had purchased bleach and gloves and garbage bags and sheetrock, but didn't think about the need for moving boxes to pack those things that we were salvaging. Nothing near us was open so I started texting friends in the suburbs, asking them to buy boxes and tape. In the middle of all the chaos, I got a group email from my department chair, asking for doctoral students to check in with her on our status. I fired back a quick message, saying that my house had flooded, and went back to the heart-wrenching job of emptying bookshelves that had held first editions collected by my late husband. We worked until dark, with me going from one room to the next, tackling one spot until it became overwhelming, then moving to another. As the afternoon and evening wore on, neighbors started coming home. My brother and two or three other friends arrived and started moving furniture we were hoping to salvage to the sunshine in the front yard to start the drying out process. By the time darkness fell, we were filthy, exhausted and overwhelmed. On some level, I was hoping we'd be heading back to the peace of our refuge on Lake Conroe, and neither my son nor I had even brought a change of clothes. Although I had the foresight to pack pajamas, I hadn't made a plan for where we'd be sleeping. We went home that night with my brother, who loaned us clothes and fed us dinner.

The next morning, I was back at the house by 7 am. Before 8, the first of the angels from the Graduate College of Social Work turned up, this one in the form of our Assistant Dean, who arrived with gloves, masks, and the increasingly necessary plastic bins, cardboard boxes and tape. As she was leaving to deliver supplies to other flooded colleagues, the chair of the PhD program arrived and started sorting photos and papers for drying. By mid-morning, there were more than 50 people in my house, from the crew of immigrant workers who were tearing the house down to studs and concrete, to the dean of our College and his husband who packed up my china cabinet; to the Hong Kong exchange students who were present every single day until the house was completely empty, and who thoughtfully pulled together a box of necessities for the apartment we would be moving into; to my Russian "child" who supervised the clean-out of my daughter's bedroom, attempting to salvage treasures from her dad and grandmother; to the faculty members who did demo work and packed up my office and counseled me on how to support my young adult children through the process; to the friends and complete strangers who showed up with food, including a woman who showed up with pizza and left with my laundry; to the dozens of people who took away bags of soaked clothing and returned it clean and dry. We were inundated with support that was much more powerful than the flood waters. Overwhelmed does not come close to describing my emotions.

I am a social worker. I know about trauma and grief. Intellectually, I had no trouble normalizing the grief associated with the loss of all of these material things. I can describe the symptoms of acute stress disorder, and readily identified them in myself and in my neighbors: nightmares, flashbacks, irritability, inability to concentrate, weepiness and increased emotionality. But I am a social worker. I do the helping. I am not supposed to need help. It wasn't just the profound loss that had me disoriented. It was the loss of a

fundamental part of my identity. I didn't know how to ask for help. I didn't know how to accept help. I found myself dissolving in tears when a stranger stopped by with breakfast tacos, stomping my feet in frustration when I found our wet but salvageable embroidered Christmas stockings sitting on top of the trash pile, and shouting at people who loved me and had the misfortune of asking me what I needed them to do next. In quiet moments, and there weren't very many of those, my thoughts would turn away from the things that we had lost, and focus on the memories: the family gatherings; Thanksgiving dinners we hosted with international friends; the friends who took refuge in our guest room from natural disasters or family conflict; the welcoming reception for our dean and his husband; the birthday parties; the dozens of students who shared our lives and our table. Who was I, if I wasn't the one welcoming the stranger, hosting the homeless, supporting others in crisis? Overnight, I became the one who was homeless, the one who was in crisis, the one who needed support.

Within 72 hours, the house was demo'd down to the studs, and the second wave of work began: getting salvageable stuff to storage and moving what was left to our new apartment. Another round of angels appeared, arriving from out of town with fresh energy to unpack, organize, grocery shop, and pick out basic furniture. Perhaps most importantly, they provided emotionally stable shoulders for my children, and were present to help make my daughter's 24<sup>th</sup> birthday something less than totally awful. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, but was really more like seven or eight days, the possessions of a couple of lifetimes and the contents of a 3200 square foot house were reduced to a 10 x 20 storage unit and a very bare two-bedroom apartment. Treasures my mother had carted across the country, some dating back a century or more, were destroyed. First edition books collected by my late husband, hauled to the curb. Photos and albums from my own childhood, my daughter's childhood, my late husband's childhood, all gone. Mattresses, box springs, sofas, dressers, bookshelves, consigned to the pile of trash.

When you looked at the pile of trash, you would think there couldn't be anything left. But we saved the piano my great-great aunt was awarded in 1871 as a prize for graduating first in her class. The Noritake china my father brought home from Occupied Japan after World War II and the Royal Copenhagen dishes that my aunt purchased in Denmark following the war, were cleaned and now is safely in storage. An oriental rug has been cleaned and looks to be as good as new. Random pieces of furniture survived, including the kitchen table and chairs, and a couple of cheap card tables. Several chairs, including the antique rocker in which I nursed my daughter, are being restored. Pots, pans and everyday dishes have been washed and are back in use.

Three months later, the curb is clean, and the grass has grown back, but my house is barren and my neighborhood remains a ghost town. Half the time, I can't remember where I live and am continuously giving people the wrong address. At least once a week, I drive on auto pilot halfway to the wrong house before remembering that I don't live there anymore. My dogs haven't quite figured out this newly urban lifestyle, where people

wander down the street at all hours, and the footsteps of the upstairs tenant trigger cacophonous warnings of unseen dangers. Ordinary conversations become complicated as I stumble over simple phrases like “I’ll call you when I get home,” and I actually spend hours trying to figure out how to describe the places I live. Is “home” the place that flooded? Or the apartment where I live? Do I just describe the neighborhoods, without claiming the connection that makes a place a home?

I miss my house and I miss my stuff. I miss the king-sized bed where I could sleep comfortably with two big dogs. I miss my kitchen where I could, almost always, locate the utensils I needed to fix almost anything I wanted and didn’t need to make what seem like daily trips to Wal-Mart for a vegetable peeler, or a spatula, or a bowl big enough to mix pasta. I miss the doggy door that meant I didn’t have to play doorman for dogs who can’t figure out whether they want to be in or out. I miss the neighbors I’ve known for years, and walked with daily, and who are scattered across the city. But as the days go by, life has settled into something that seems normal. I love my apartment, with hardwood floors and big windows. I’m discovering that downsizing isn’t all bad, and I really can live comfortably in a space that is about a third the size of what I was used to. I love being back in the urban core of Houston, where many of my flooded neighbors and friends have also settled, where I can walk to church, and breakfast, and the grocery store.

But it isn’t yet home. Home is where I raised my daughter and foster son, lost my husband far too early, celebrated my mother’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, hosted so many dinners, study sessions, house guests, and international students I came to love as my own children. Where Thanksgiving dinner included friends from around the world, and my dad singing bawdy songs he learned while serving in the Pacific Theater during World War II. The place where Muslim and Hindu students from Pakistan and Tunisia spent Thanksgiving night decorating my Christmas tree with my Jewish foster son and Christian daughter. Where Christmas Eves included my Jewish son waiting for Santa with Muslim children while my Christian daughter and I attended midnight mass with their mother. Where one of those children woke me up at 2:00 am on Christmas morning asking “Auntie Ann, Auntie Ann, is it Christmas morning yet?” And whose first question when he saw my new apartment was “where will we wait for Santa this year?” The only answer I had for him then was “we’ll figure it out. Santa will find us.”

After a lot of soul-searching and number crunching, my family has decided that our best option is to repair our house, but not return to live in it. With the market glutted with flooded homes, selling now would be too much of a financial loss. Assuming we don’t flood again, my realtor friends tell me that the market will recover and we are lucky to be in a position to wait it out for a bit. Returning to the house makes little sense either, as my kids are finishing college and I am finishing a PhD. Given the vagaries of the academic market, there is no way to know where I will find a job next year. We no longer have the stuff to fill a 4-bedroom house, and it makes little sense to purchase all that furniture when I don’t know where I or my children will be in a year. So, we will stay in our apartment for the

moment. We will repair and hopefully find tenants who will love the house as much as we have. My goal is to have the house put back together in time to host one last party: a graduation celebration in May for my daughter.

The storm has unquestionably taken a toll. Without flood insurance, my savings has taken a significant hit, although I am grateful for FEMA assistance and the availability of an SBA disaster loan to help with the recovery process. I had planned to defend my dissertation in the spring of 2018, but dissertation research this fall took a distant second place to researching the various options for dealing with my flooded home. I have pushed back my timeline with a goal of defending in the summer of 2018. I continue to experience attention and concentration difficulties, and frequently feel like I can't keep a thought in my head for more than a minute or two. I have neglected friendships, ignored new babies and forgotten birthdays. The sound of rain, which used to be relaxing, now triggers mild anxiety. I don't get nearly enough exercise, as the gym I previously visited several times a week is no longer less than a mile from my home, and the neighbors I walked with daily are scattered to the four winds. I eat out far more often than I used to, in part because it is fun to try new restaurants in my new part of town, but also because every time I try to cook a meal, I discover something else that is most likely in storage, but most definitely is not in my kitchen. As is always the case after a loss, the holidays have been challenging this year. After years of hosting others, I was devastated when no one seemed to think about inviting us to share their Thanksgiving dinner. Rationally, I knew that many of the people who had been at our Thanksgiving feasts were neighbors who had also flooded, or students who had returned to their home countries, but nonetheless, I found myself grieving all over again. But we have figured out a plan to wait for Santa, who has graciously agreed to visit a few days early, so that we can have Christmas with our Muslim children and also with our oldest friends in New Orleans. The traditions are changing, but my family is surrounded by love and the support of our extended and adopted family and friends.

Unquestionably, it has been a difficult semester. When people ask how you get through a disaster like this, I think the only answer is "one step at a time." I am privileged in more ways than I can begin to comprehend, and my family is well on our way to recovery. I am looking forward to the day that I can return to my comfort zone, and again become the care giver, the social worker, and provide a refuge to those in need. In the meantime, we are building a new home and making new memories.

**Ann E. Webb** is an attorney, a licensed clinical social worker, and a Ph.D. student at the University of Houston, where her research focuses on the intersection of social work and the law, with a particular interest in multidisciplinary practice involving social workers and lawyers, and immigration issues affecting children and families. She has served as faculty on collaborative projects involving social work and law students assisting detained women and children seeking asylum. Her scholarly agenda is informed by her experience as a lawyer and social work clinician, and by her role as an advocate for underserved populations.

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# **After the Storm: Reflections on Volunteering at Shelters after Hurricane Harvey**

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## **Introduction**

As climate change increasingly devastates all areas of the globe through natural disasters, vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected. People with unstable housing, little income, and poor health prior to a major disaster will have access to even fewer resources after their homes, jobs, and environments have been destroyed. Natural disasters such as Hurricanes Harvey in Houston, Irma in Florida, Maria in Puerto Rico, fires along the West Coast of the United States, monsoons in India, and earthquakes in Mexico have ended and disrupted thousands of lives in 2017 alone. The effects of Hurricane Harvey drew social workers from the city of Houston, Texas, to volunteer in droves, whether at shelters, churches, homes, schools, food banks, or other places in need. It was inspiring to watch as social workers from macro and clinical settings, from administration and medicine, from private practice and schools appeared across the city to give their time.

Why did they do it? To help others, of course, but what is at the heart of the social work profession that makes us both so driven to help in a time of need and so uniquely qualified to serve others? And, more importantly, what can we do better next time to ensure that we fully utilize the abundance of skills and time social workers are willing to give after natural disasters? Collectively, the two authors with LMSW spent approximately four days serving as social work volunteers at a large public shelter following Hurricane

Harvey. Based on the authors' own experiences and their conversations with other social work volunteers, this article reflects the authors' perspectives on the social work response to Hurricane Harvey and future disaster relief efforts.

## **Social Work Response**

### **Motivation to Volunteer**

The second author spoke with ten social workers about their experiences volunteering at shelters during Hurricane Harvey. Most of the social workers, including the author herself, cited some source of inner drive that goes by many names. Some said they felt a calling, others cited their service-oriented personality, and many simply stated that they couldn't imagine *not* doing something after seeing their fellow Houstonians in need. Many social workers, including those in higher education administration, research, teaching, or many facets of macro social work do not provide direct client interventions on a regular basis. These social workers felt it was particularly important to volunteer and spend time in the field with those directly affected since they would not encounter the clients in their jobs. Social workers were devastated from watching families struggle to find their most basic needs on local news channels and felt they must contribute to the healing of their city. . Many of the reasons social workers cited for volunteering reflected the reasons they entered the field of social work.

### **Calls to Action**

Whatever motivated social workers to volunteer worked. Major public shelters were established around the city, including the George R. Brown Convention Center (GRB) in downtown Houston, which housed more than 10,000 people, and NRG Park near Reliant Stadium in Houston's medical center, which housed more than 2,000 people (Collier, Satija, & Formby, 2017). Local officials issued urgent requests for killed volunteers at these shelters. Twitter and Facebook posts from Mayor Sylvester Turner, Director of Housing and Community Development Tom McCasland, and the City of Houston elicited help from social workers and other health professionals. For example, the City of Houston (2017) Twitter account tweeted the following in the early days of the hurricane on August 28<sup>th</sup>: "GEORGE R. BROWN NEEDS LICENSED MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS, RNS & SOCIAL WORKERS. If you can safely get there, go. Find Tom McCasland head of ops." The posts were widely shared and circulated by influential members of the Houston social work community, including the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) dean, Alan Dettlaff. Though some social workers heard about opportunities to volunteer through TV or radio news channels, many cited at least one social media platform as their source of volunteer information. The social media posts often included links to sign up for volunteer shifts online, though the efficiency of these links varied widely. Social workers from around the city responded with zeal to these calls for social work support at shelters. They continued to sign up and show up at the shelters in the weeks after Harvey, sometimes



missing work or skipping sleep to make themselves present for the shelter residents. Often, so many social workers arrived at a shelter that some had to be turned away.

### **Social Work Skills**

Why were social workers so heavily recruited to help in the shelters, and what makes us so uniquely qualified to provide our skills during disaster relief efforts? Perhaps the answer lies in the core values from National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics with which all social workers become familiar during graduate school: social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Many of the residents at large shelters were people of color from low socioeconomic households who were in their most vulnerable state; they were driven out of their homes by the floods, forced to leave behind the places and things they had worked so hard to obtain, traumatized by the loss of life as they had known it only days before. Social workers worked toward social justice by ensuring that residents of the shelters (or “guests,” as they were called at NRG) were directed to the resources they needed, including food, shelter, and supplies for themselves and their children. We promoted residents’ dignity through honoring their space; the temporary cots residents were issued were likely meager compared to many residents’ usual dwellings, but the space was the only area of the shelter that was theirs for the time. We used our integrity and leadership to make changes when and where we could that would benefit the residents. We recognized and respected that many guests may display signs of trauma, mental illness, and anger, and we responded to those symptoms with core social work competencies learned recently or many years ago in our social work training.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we focused on the importance of relationships. In such an abbreviated time, with limited privacy or resources, we tried our best to make others feel valued and heard. We worked to reunite parents with children, friends with friends, and people with their beloved pets. A last-minute policy change in the early days of the storm allowed pets to be housed indoors at shelters as a response to complaints during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 from pet owners who were devastated by separation from their pets who were not allowed into the shelters with them (Brulliard, 2017). We formed our own relationships with residents, however fleeting they might have been. We listened. We heard. We validated. Perhaps to other professions, listening seems trivial. However, after all our social work education, training, and years of practice, we know that listening with empathy is an art and a gift. It was, to many residents, an incredibly important gift during a time when they did not need advice or judgment, just an ear to hear what they had endured. As a profession, we understand that there is a time and a place for empathic listening just as there is for advice, and we are trained to know the difference. In the shelters, we focused on strengths and empowered residents to draw upon their deepest wells of strength during a time when life could seem hopeless. The importance of fostering such relationships through the simple act of listening after such a traumatic event cannot be overstated.

Social workers clearly have a vast pool of skills and tools to offer during a natural disaster, and yet some of their efforts were not fully utilized when they arrived at shelters. As noted previously, some social workers were turned away because too many volunteers had already come. Others conducted unskilled, but still useful, tasks such as welcoming people to the shelters or organizing donations. Though these tasks could have been performed by other volunteers, some social work skills such as de-escalation and problem solving proved useful. However, larger missed opportunities occurred when social workers were directed to a designated area for mental health professionals and waited in anticipation for hours without speaking to a single resident. A skilled professional had taken time from her day, made the effort to drive to a shelter, park, and find the mental health area, and her skills were not utilized. For some social workers, these barriers deterred them from attempting to volunteer again. These barriers resulted in volunteers who felt disappointed, demoralized, and useless in a time of need and residents who lost the benefit of a valuable source of support. How can we prevent this from happening in the future such that we are able to adequately use the services offered by volunteer social workers?

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on their own experiences, reflections, and conversations with other social workers, the authors have summarized some suggestions for better utilizing social workers' skills in disaster relief volunteer roles.

First, shelter staff should identify professionals' background and specialized skills. When the authors were signing up to volunteer at the NRG shelter, the host organization, Baker Ripley, collected this important information on volunteer applications. In addition to questions regarding current employment, the Baker Ripley online application also asked, "What passions or skills would you like to share?" A multiple-choice list provided options such as teaching and mentoring, healthcare and nutrition, and others. When the authors arrived the NRG shelter on the service day, they had another chance to report their skills to the staff at the check-in table. Staff appeared to document the first author's additional credentials and skills, which included holding a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) and fluency in Chinese Mandarin. All of this information provided the social service agency with a general sense of volunteers' competency and expertise.

However, after the first author entered the NRG shelter, the staff did not appear to assign roles based upon volunteers' skills. The first author waited in the lobby area for hours with many other volunteers who likely lacked specialized mental health care skills, as staff announced various basic needs and the number of volunteers required to accomplish that need. For example, a flood of volunteers who had been waiting for hours rushed forward to be sent to set up cots in the sleeping area, but many had to return to their seats as the staff member only needed a group of five for cot setup. After waiting for

an hour in the lobby for a volunteer assignment, the first author finally assigned to the area where female residents were assigned to sleep in hopes of finding a place where she could be useful.

Therefore, the second suggestion is to assign tasks within the shelter based on volunteers' skills and strengths. Since the volunteer application and the check-in process were both conducted online, the information should be accessible to the volunteer coordinator onsite. Rather than assigning volunteers to tasks based on how long they have been waiting to serve, they should be grouped into skillsets and assigned to tasks where they can be of the most benefit to the organization or the residents. For example, when staff need someone to walk around in the single female area to check in with residents who might be struggling emotionally, they can search in their database for social workers and counselors, who are more likely good at building rapport and actively listening, particularly in such a short period of time.

Third, some areas could use more volunteers to serve as floaters, greeters, and mediators. For example, the first author ultimately decided to volunteer in the section of the shelter designated for handing out donations to residents, and the area would have benefitted from many more volunteers. Even in times when few residents were picking up items, there were many tasks for volunteers to complete. As floaters, they could help to reorganize the diapers and clothes by sizes, rearrange the messy piles of shoes, or just walking around to get familiar with the area as preparation for the next round of picking up and packing. When the pickup line grows and results in longer wait times, volunteers could act as "greeters" and check in with residents as they wait. During these check-ins, the volunteers could collect residents' donation requests, deliver the requests to the "runner" who retrieves items, and explain which information the residents will need to present at the donations check-in. Taking the time to explain the process may make residents feel more comfortable and at ease as they become familiar with the various processes of the shelter. The greeters' conversations with the waiting residents can also help to ease their negative emotions such as anxiety and anger resulting from long time waiting and other general complications.

Though the shelter tries to provide as many supplies, resources, and services to residents as possible, it will inevitably fall short of expectations and cause frustration among residents. For example, runners might be unable to provide a stroller to a resident in need because all strollers have been claimed by other residents, or check-in volunteers accidentally fail to write down all the items residents requested. A professional with mediation and de-escalation skills may provide excellent support as they help residents problem solve in such circumstances. Having a professional as a third person to provide mediation would help less skilled runners and busy check-in volunteers to return to their stations and continue distributing items, while the conflicts can be solved by someone else. Unfortunately, in the first authors' experience, the donation center experienced a high volume of residents in the pick-up line with too few skilled and unskilled staff to

adequately control the area, while many other volunteers were still waiting in the lobby for their assignments. When accidents occurred, the involved volunteers including the first author had to stop working to comfort unsatisfied residents, causing the wait and dissatisfaction to grow exponentially. This example demonstrates that even shelter areas that are not specifically designated to mental health or resources may benefit greatly from the presence of professionals who can lend their skills to maintain a peaceful environment for residents and volunteers alike.

### Conclusions

The devastating aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in Houston, TX, inspired many social workers, including the two authors, to contribute their time and skills through volunteering at large local shelters. Social workers identified opportunities to volunteer primarily through social media posts that informed them when and where their skills were needed. Social work volunteers contributed many valuable skills at the shelters, including empathy, listening, mediation, de-escalation, and problem solving. The experience was often rewarding, fulfilling, and frustrating due to changeable organizational factors. As climate change becomes a growing concern, the need for social workers to mobilize in future disaster situations is imminent. To best serve the people who will need us most, we need to ensure that we are prepared to fully utilize the skills social workers and other professionals can offer. Shelter staff should identify the professionals' specialized skills and interests, create and assign tasks that are relevant to those interests, and use specialized volunteers in complementary roles with general volunteers to maximize effectiveness. These recommendations will help shelters use social workers' unique skillset, and help social work volunteers feel more valued, and encourage volunteers to return to the shelter for additional shifts.

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