

The Social Determinants of Health: A Social Work Perspective

The Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) refer to the social and economic conditions that impact on the health and well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2008) describes these determinants as the circumstances in which people are raised, live, experience, grow and age. They include education, socioeconomic status, employment, housing, positive early life experiences, access to social supports, and food security.

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) Position

NLASW believes that effective health services must integrate the social determinants of health.

NLASW supports health equity for all citizens. When people have access to the social determinants of health, health and quality of life is improved.

NLASW recognizes that investments in social programming, early intervention and prevention initiatives have significant health benefits and reduces direct health care costs.

NLASW embraces intersectoral collaboration and interdisciplinary team work in the delivery of health services.

NLASW believes that actions to enhance population health must incorporate horizontal policy analysis and research across government departments, agencies and community based organizations.

NLASW believes that social workers have expert knowledge on the social determinants of health and must provide leadership to advance the determinants and reduce health inequities.

Social & Economic Context

Social workers have a thorough understanding of the interplay between and impact of the social determinants on one's physical and mental health. The 'person in environment' has been the framework from which social workers have explored these determinants in practice. Through an ecological perspective, social workers are able to explore the impact of inequity on health and well-being, and identify opportunities and policy changes that are needed to improve health.

Economic equality lays the foundation for a healthy population. Raphael (2010), as cited in Campaign 2000 (2014) notes that the “incidence of poverty is a severe – if not the most severe – threat to the health and quality of life of individuals, communities, and societies in wealthy industrialized societies such as Canada” (p. 6). The economic gap is widening and the inequitable distribution of resources continues. This is concerning as income disparity affects physical health, mental health, addictions, crime, chronic disease and education. While individuals who live in poverty experience more health problems than those who don’t live in or experience poverty, the WHO (2003) notes that “the social gradient in health runs right across society” (p. 10). A 2011 report from the National Council of Welfare demonstrates that “about 20% of health care spending in Canada can be attributed to socio-economic factors such as income-related disparities.” Social policy is health policy, and with the rising cost of health care, the social determinants of health must be given priority.

Policy Framework

The social work profession is committed to improving the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities through counselling, social policy analysis, collaboration, research, health promotion and community capacity building. As a profession social workers uphold the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice and are committed to advancing human rights and social justice.

The Commission on Social Determinants of Health, established by the WHO noted the following three overarching recommendations for creating better social conditions for health:

1. Improve daily living conditions
2. Tackle the inequitable distribution of power, money, and resources
3. Measure and understand the problem and assess the impact of action

(WHO, 2008)

The NLASW believes that health and social policy development must reflect the social determinants of health framework with the goal of improving daily living conditions for all peoples, reducing inequities in health, and fostering positive health outcomes for individuals and communities. This includes policies to address poverty, inadequate wages, and the growing economic gap; investments in affordable and sustainable housing; programs/policies to address food security; support for early intervention and prevention programs; investments in early childhood learning and childcare; and the creation of conditions to promote social inclusion.

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This direction is also consistent with the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005) as outlined in the following excerpts:

Social workers respect the unique worth and dignity of all people and uphold human rights.

Social workers uphold the right of people to have access to resources to meet basic needs.

Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits.

The social determinants of health provide a framework for the analysis and development of national, provincial and municipal policies that enhance the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Social workers, community members, organizations and governments have a responsibility to advance the social determinants of health and tackle the root causes of health inequities.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) is the regulatory body and professional association for social work in Newfoundland and Labrador. The vision is Excellence in Social Work.

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