ENVISIONING THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL WORK

Report of the CSWE Futures Task Force
April 2018

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The social work profession has always been—and remains—deeply committed to addressing the most pressing issues facing our society, such as structural racism, social justice, and economic inequality. In addition to our historic focus, we also recognize the need to be poised to address emerging issues such as climate change, migration, and the digital divide.

The four scenarios for the future of social work developed by the CSWE Futures Task Force describe alternative contexts in which social workers may be operating. It explores the roles social workers may play as they anticipate and respond to the critical issues facing individuals, families, communities, and society at large. The profession's values and ethics compel us to continue to address these issues regardless of which of the scenarios may prove to be most accurate. Equally important, the scenarios raise questions for our profession in terms of how we prepare today's students for what the future might hold.

BACKGROUND

The profession of social work stands at the nexus of immense opportunities and incredible challenges.

In many ways the future of the social work profession has never been brighter. Social work is one of the fastest growing professions in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018), and social workers are playing critical roles in promoting individual, family, and community well-being and in advancing social and economic justice. And beyond the direct impact social workers are having on policy and practice, the Grand Challenges for Social Work (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, 2018) outline the incredible contributions that social workers can make in addressing the most important social issues of our time.

The profession is also facing significant challenges. Demographic trends and rising economic inequality are increasing demand for social work services, particularly for the most vulnerable populations; at the same time, funding cuts are threatening the budgets of safety-net service providers. The enduring and inadequately addressed effects of chattel slavery and racism converge with the growing income gap, creating increasing division and polarization of society that threatens the social fabric of our communities. And the rapid growth of technology is affecting society and the profession in ways we have yet to fully understand. Will technology offer solutions to these enduring problems or only serve to further exacerbate the social and digital divide?

In this volatile and uncertain environment, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) launched its Futures Task Force. Today's social work graduates will still be practicing in 2050 or even longer. What might the profession of social work look like at that time? What might the roles of social workers include?

The goal of the Futures Task Force was to envision the future of social work as a precursor to a more traditional strategic planning effort that CSWE will launch in 2018. The Futures Task Force was based on the idea that before setting direction for the future of social work education—and developing a strategic plan to guide CSWE's work—it is important to develop greater clarity about the future of the profession

of social work. In doing so, we can be better positioned to prepare graduates of CSWE's member programs for their professional futures.

Recognizing that there is no single future for the profession, and that any attempt to predict the future with a high level of certainty is doomed to failure (particularly during this period of unprecedented change in the political, health, and higher education sectors), CSWE opted to undertake a scenario planning approach that resulted in the development of four alternative futures for the social work profession.

The scenario planning effort began with an environmental scanning process that explored the trends affecting the future of the profession. The environmental scan included interviews with key thought leaders in social work and other professions; a survey sent to all CSWE program and individual members; and a review of existing reports, articles, and studies related to the social work workforce and emerging trends in practice.

The CSWE Futures Task Force met in December 2017 to review the outcomes of the environmental scan and explore the trends likely to shape the future of the profession. Based on this work, four scenarios for the future of social work were developed. The Task Force then framed, but did not seek to answer, the most important questions that the scenarios raise for the future of social work education.

THE SCENARIO PLANNING PROCESS

"Scenario planning derives from the observation that, given the impossibility of knowing precisely how the future will play out, a good decision or strategy to adopt is one that plays out well across several possible futures" (Wilkinson, 1995).

The social work profession has always been—and remains—deeply committed to addressing the most pressing issues facing our society such as structural racism, social justice, and economic inequality. In addition to our historic focus, we recognize the need to be poised to address emerging issues such as climate change, migration, and the digital divide.

The scenarios for the future of social work developed by the CSWE Futures Task Force describe alternative contexts in which social workers will be operating. It explores the roles social workers may play as they anticipate and respond to these critical issues facing individuals, families, communities and society at large. The profession's values and ethics compel us to continue to address these issues regardless of which of the scenarios may prove to be most accurate. Equally important, the scenarios raise questions for our profession in terms of how we prepare today's students for what the future might hold.

1. The first step in scenario planning is articulating the question to be addressed. In establishing the charge for the Task Force, the CSWE Board was clear about the questions CSWE was seeking to answer: What is the future of the profession of social work, and what are the implications of that future for social work education?

2. The next step is to identify the trends (or key drivers) shaping the future of the profession. The Futures Task Force conducted key informant interviews and focus groups, surveyed the membership, and undertook a document review to identify the many forces shaping the future of social work. The Task Force categorized the trends into five groups: political, economic, social, technological and educational. A summary of the key trends can be found in Appendix A.

3. The Futures Task Force then mapped the key trends, differentiating influential trends that are known and predictable from those that would have a significant impact on the profession's future but are less certain. The Task Force separated the trends that are fairly certain and understood (e.g., growth in the aging population, increasing diversity among the U.S. population, the shift toward integrated physical and behavioral health care) from less certain trends that could have major impacts on the future of the profession depending on how they play out over time. In the language of scenario planning this second set of trends is referred to as *critical uncertainties*. The critical uncertainties included questions such as the following:

    * What level of leadership and influence will social workers have in the profession? Beyond the profession?
    * Will inequality and class separation continue to grow or begin to be reduced?
    * Will there be increased or reduced access to high-quality and available health care, including behavioral health services?
    * Will social work be operating in a consumer-driven (self-directed) or provider-driven economy?
    * To what degree will the social work profession harness and leverage technology to advance its work?

4. There were many more potential uncertainties discussed, but the issues above rose to the top of the list for the Task Force. Next, the Task Force selected two of the critical uncertainties to form the axes of a scenario matrix. The Task Force explored multiple frameworks for the scenarios but ultimately landed on the following combination of factors it believes will shape the possible future of the profession.

    * ***The first axis of uncertainty is the level of leadership and influence social workers will have within or beyond the profession.*** This question has significant implications for the sectors and fields in which social workers will be working and the roles they will play. Will social workers be primarily operating within the traditional environments of the profession? Or will social workers be leaders beyond social work, bringing their skill sets and mindsets to nontraditional work environments such as the technology sector, business, state and federal political offices, and federal agencies, initiating and guiding

national conversations and initiatives? (As a reminder, this is not an exercise to pick the right answer but rather different ways the future of social work may unfold.)

- ***The second axis of uncertainty is the degree to which social work will harness and leverage technology to advance its work***. Will social work undergo an evolution, using technology to improve historic ways of working, or will the profession undergo a revolution, leveraging artificial intelligence, big data, and other technological innovations to advance social well-being through new strategies and approaches?

5. Combining the two axes, the Task Force created a scenario matrix framing four plausible but different futures for the social work profession. Plausibility is key in scenario planning. Although many things are possible, it was important to the Task Force that the alternative futures described had a sense of face validity rather than fantasy. The scenario matrix appears in Figure 1, with additional details about each of the scenarios in the pages that follow. The scenario matrix containing the four potential futures for social work is shown in Figure 2.

6. The final step in CSWE's scenario planning process was to identify the critical questions and potential implications of the scenarios for social work education and frame key questions for CSWE to consider as it undertakes its own strategic planning effort. Several of the issues identified will affect social work education regardless of how the future unfolds and provide a strong starting point for CSWE's strategic planning discussions.

SCENARIO OVERVIEWS: FOUR FUTURES FOR SOCIAL WORK

	High Tech (*Revolution in Technology*)		
Leadership Within Social Work	Scenario 1	Scenario 4	**Leadership Beyond Social Work**
	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	
	Low Tech (*Evolution in Technology*)		

Figure 1: Two Axes Forming the Scenario Matrix

Scenario 1: Embracing Technology to Enhance Practice

Social workers are leveraging new technologies to enhance practice at all levels to improve the human condition and are engaged in the use and adaptation of technological tools and services to ensure that approaches remain true to professional values and commitments. Social work's ethical use of big data enables new approaches to solving age-old challenges such as persistent inequality and poverty through interventions at the individual, family, community, and system levels. Social workers ensure that technology addresses structural inequalities by attending to the potential "digital divide" and integrating technology into all aspects of practice from engagement to evaluation.

Scenario 2: Building on Our Successes

The future of social work builds on its historic and current strengths, incrementally integrating technology into its practice at all levels. Social workers continue to be concentrated in behavioral health and child welfare while stepping into other roles as systems evolve to enhance well-being for all.

Scenario 3: Social Workers Are Leaders Everywhere

Businesses and the public recognize that the core competencies of social work (e.g., systems thinking, problem solving, relationship building, team building) are the core competencies of leadership regardless of environment. Although the emphasis is not on technology, social workers are increasingly taking on key leadership roles in government, human relations, business, and the nonprofit sector, extending the profession's values and impact throughout society.

Scenario 4: Social Work Leadership for a High-Tech World

Social workers are innovators of social change, using cutting-edge technologies to advance social justice and improve health outcomes. Social workers are leading interdisciplinary teams of technologists, engineers, health professionals, and others to tackle the most compelling social issues facing our nation and our world.

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	Low Tech (*Evolution in Technology*)		

Figure 2: Scenario Matrix with Four Potential Futures

Scenario 1: Embracing Technology to Enhance Practice

Axis 1:   Leadership within the profession
Axis 2:   High level of integration of technology

Overview

Social workers are leveraging new technologies to enhance practice at all levels to improve the human condition and are engaged in the use and adaptation of technological tools and services to ensure that approaches remain true to professional values and commitments. Social work's ethical use of big data enables new approaches to solving age-old challenges such as persistent inequality and poverty through interventions at the micro and system levels. Social workers ensure that technology addresses structural inequalities by attending to the potential "digital divide" and integrating technology into all aspects of practice from engagement to evaluation.

Scenario Narrative

Building on the best practices and historic approach of social work, social workers are leveraging technology to deliver effective services, identify and address individual and diverse community needs, and protect and inform policy that advances social justice through the eradication of poverty, physical and emotional barriers, and other disparities that affect social well-being.

Social workers continue to focus on traditional areas of practice, though the work is augmented by the use of new technologies to achieve outcomes and improve the human condition. Beyond that, social workers are engaged in the development of technological tools and services to ensure that approaches are consistent with the profession's commitment to equity. Social work's ethical use of big data enables new approaches to solving age-old challenges and informs policy.

Telehealth and behavioral health apps help social workers increase access, particularly in underserved and remote communities. Although the hour-long weekly appointment remains popular, social workers are harnessing technology to offer new modes of interaction between patients and clinicians: on-demand appointments, 5-minute mini-sessions, and even the use of apps and artificial intelligence to provide some basic services (e.g., assessment, support for the management of chronic conditions). Real-time translation leads to exponential growth in global practice and supports the development of global community.

Given the fundamental role technology plays in society, and recognizing the impact of the digital divide on vulnerable populations such as the aging and the poor, social workers will lead efforts to increase access to technology (e.g., smart phones, high-speed Internet) through advocacy at the local, state, and federal level and by teaching older adults and disadvantaged populations how to make use of technology to improve their health, safety, and well-being, decreasing their sense of social isolation.

Social workers monitor clients' wearable technologies to support individual outcomes and to use the community-level data they provide to inform system changes to enhance community-level well-being. Social workers are acutely aware of how lack of access to technological advancements adversely affects the well-being of disadvantaged populations. Social workers use social media to advance community

organizing and policy advocacy and to support community mobilization, particularly in times of personal or community crisis. Apps enable social workers to instantly connect clients to available resources such as services, job training, food delivery, or housing.

The high-tech environment for social work has led to an increase in evidence-based practice and outcome tracking. Big data enables social work to identify the interventions and policies with the greatest impact for specific populations. Clear outcomes (particularly health outcomes), in terms of return on investment and social return on investment, lead to increased payment for behavioral health services but also to outcome-based payment models for services.

Critical Questions for the Future of Social Work Education

1. How might social work education prepare students for the use of technology in teaching, learning, and practice?

2. How might social work education prepare students for the ethical use of big data?

3. How might social work education prepare practitioners to apply professional values to the use of technology?

4. What are the implications of this scenario for faculty development?

5. What are the implications of this scenario for needed resources? How can social work education prevent a growing digital divide in schools based on available institutional resources?

Scenario 2: Building on Our Successes

Axis 1: Leadership in the profession
Axis 2: Lower level of integration of technology
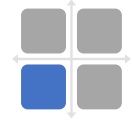
Overview

The future of social work builds on its historic and current strengths, incrementally integrating technology into its practice at all levels. Social workers continue to be concentrated in behavioral health and child welfare, while stepping into other roles as systems evolve to enhance well-being for all.

Scenario Narrative

As it has always done, the social work profession rises to the challenges in society. Vulnerable populations, including communities of color, low income communities, and the rapidly growing aging population increase demand for social work, leading to the continued growth of the social work profession. Social work continues to evolve from within, strengthening social work practice, increasing diversity and inclusion within the profession, engaging in policy advocacy and system change, reaffirming the profession's commitment to social justice and well-being, and leveraging its strengths-based approach. Frustrated with the state of our society and determined to solve the most important challenges facing our communities, more social workers are working in traditional practice settings, and more social workers are focusing on the root causes of these persistent challenges to community well-being.

Technology is incrementally integrated into the direct delivery of services (as it becomes more widely adopted within the health and behavioral health communities) and is also being leveraged for both administration and community-based data collection and engagement efforts.

Social workers are the primary providers of behavioral health services in the country, working in health system and private practice settings. As the nation moves to a more integrated health system, there is pressure for independent social work practices to align with health systems (similar to the experience of physicians over the past decade). This shift is accelerated by a change to value-based payment models linked to evidence-based practice.

Social workers are celebrated by the individuals and families they engage with, but there remains low public recognition of what social workers do, and the profession's external influence (beyond the profession) is relatively limited.

Critical Questions for the Future of Social Work Education

1. How might social work education prepare students to step into new roles and environments?

2. How might social work programs better prepare students for practice environments that are increasingly value-based and evidenced-based (such as integrated health systems)?

3. How might social work programs better prepare students given the changing demographics of society?

4. What are the implications of this scenario for faculty development?

5. What are the implications of this scenario for needed resources?

Scenario 3: Social Workers Are Leaders Everywhere

Axis 1:   Leadership beyond the profession
Axis 2:   Lower level of integration of technology
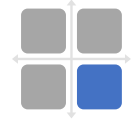
Overview

Businesses and the public recognize that the core competencies of social work (e.g., systems thinking, problem solving, relationship building, team building) are the core competencies of leadership regardless of environment. Although the emphasis is not on technology, social workers are increasingly taking on key leadership roles in government, human relations, business, and the nonprofit sector, extending the profession's values and impact throughout society.

Scenario Narrative

The core competencies of social workers—skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, relationship and team building, and cultural competency—are recognized and embraced as the leadership skills needed in all professions. Increasingly, businesses, government, and nonprofit organizations are looking to social work to prepare the workforce needed for the future, and the social work degree has become the "*degree of choice*" for employers because social work graduates bring the mix of knowledge and skills needed for success in the new global business environment.

Although they remain the primary providers of behavioral health services in the country, social workers are also popping up in new and nontraditional roles, bringing social work thinking and the values and social justice framework of the profession to these new environments. Social workers are taking on key leadership roles (on boards and key staff roles) in health systems; hospitals and insurance companies; Fortune 500 companies; political office and federal, state, and local government; and in any organization facing a volatile and uncertain future that requires systems thinking to navigate successfully. Social work leadership is particularly visible during crisis situations (natural or human instigated), providing direct supports and leading the complex response that requires systems thinking and sensitivity to the needs of the most vulnerable populations.

Because social workers are imbedded in leadership roles in these organizations, they are setting policies, developing products, and making decisions that benefit all, including the diverse and vulnerable groups that are often forgotten or left behind. Social work's influence has also helped bring about increased diversity and inclusion in these organizations, shown in the composition of their boards and staff members but also, and of equal importance, in their thinking and cultural competence.

Social workers are leading efforts to enhance quality of life throughout the lifespan, from healthy child development outcomes to the ability of older adults to age in place. In addition to the individual and family supports they provide, social workers are leading local, state, and national organizations focused on the needs of the aging population (e.g., Children's Defense Fund and American Association of Retired Persons) and are leading government agencies and legislative bodies that are shaping the policies that impact this population. Because of social work's involvement, policy and practice have led to increases in longevity and quality of life for older adults, and more people are able to access the support they need to age in place in their communities.

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Social workers are helping the nation navigate its changing demographic diversity and are leading global-, national-, and community-level efforts to combat the growing inequality and class separation in society. Social workers are on the front lines in community organizing, advocating, and undertaking voter engagement efforts and are working in government agencies and think tanks providing the seminal research reports that are shaping the debate on these issues. With their knowledge of culturally competent practice, focus on human rights, and knowledge of policy advocacy, social workers can bridge gaps in human relations and work to advocate for systemic changes that reduce inequality.

With social workers in leadership roles in health systems and hospitals (including their leadership of interprofessional health teams) and government agencies with health-care responsibilities, more emphasis is being placed on promotion of wellness and the social determinants of health. And new models for health systems are being developed that increase access to affordable high-quality care for all.

When there is a complex problem to be solved, society looks to social work for the solution. And with this increased awareness of the value of social work leadership, the profession's impact on society grows in new and unexpected ways.

Critical Questions for the Future of Social Work Education

1. How might social work education integrate professional and interdisciplinary leadership into the curriculum to better prepare graduates for leadership roles in addressing the critical issues facing our communities and society?

2. How might social work education take a leadership role in increasing understanding of social determinants of health among all professions?

3. How might social work education position the social work degree as the pathway to leadership across professions and sectors?

4. What are the implications of this scenario for faculty development?

5. What are the implications of this scenario for needed resources?

Scenario 4: Social Work Leadership for a High-Tech World

Axis 1: Leadership beyond the profession
Axis 2: Higher level of integration of technology
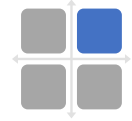
Overview

Social workers are innovators of social change, using cutting-edge technologies to advance social justice and improve health outcomes. Social workers are leading interdisciplinary teams of technologists, engineers, health professionals, and others to tackle the most compelling social issues facing our nation and our world.

Scenario Narrative

Recognizing the critical role technology plays in all aspects of today's society, social workers have led the charge to position technology as a human right, thereby ensuring that everyone has access to the platform needed to engage in civic society, access programs and services, learn, and connect with others.

With this core human right secured, social workers take on a greater leadership role in harnessing and leveraging cutting-edge technology to advance social justice. Social workers storm Silicon Valley (and the Technorati come to Hull House) as the technology and social work professions partner to improve the human condition. Grounded in the history and values of the profession, but bringing the mindset of social entrepreneurs, social workers are taking leadership roles in business, technology companies, government, and think tanks, bringing social work's perspective to all parts of society and being viewed as critical members of the leadership team.

Building on their strengths in systems thinking and problem solving, social workers are innovators of social change, leading consortiums of technologists, engineers, and allied disciplines to address the most compelling social issues facing society. Because of social work's involvement, these solutions are accessible, effective, ethical, and ensure that the most vulnerable populations benefit (rather than being once again left behind).

Leveraging new technologies and big data, social workers are working with tech companies to create algorithms that enable communities to identify and respond to social challenges quickly and nimbly (hot spotting), leading to policies and programs that benefit all communities. Informed by social work leadership, new products and services are brought to market that improve quality of life for older adults (e.g., driverless cars, on-demand delivery services, health and wellness technologies); bring fresh foods to communities lacking grocery stores (e.g., grocery delivery); prepare communities for the impact of climate change (e.g., coordinated emergency response, forecasting, human center disaster planning) and improve health in rural communities (e.g., new health technologies, accessibility to health promotion efforts) among other benefits. Big data is also being used to drive advances in artificial intelligence (AI) that enables widespread, high-quality, ethical access to AI-based behavioral health services.

Critical Questions for the Future of Social Work Education

1. How might social work education better integrate existing and emerging technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence, apps, wearable technologies) and big data into the curriculum?

2. How might social work education provide leadership in ensuring that access to technology is a human right?

3. How might social work education prepare students to operate at the nexus of social work and technology?

4. What are the implications of this scenario for faculty development?

5. What are the implications of this scenario for needed resources? How can social work education prevent a growing digital divide in our schools based on available institutional resources?

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The CSWE Futures Task Force has outlined four alternative scenarios for the future of social work that frame significant questions about the role social workers will play in the future and the implications for social work education programs as they prepare graduates for that future.

The scenarios highlight two critical uncertainties about the future of social work: the degree to which social workers will be providing leadership and exerting influence in or external to the social work profession, and the degree to which social work will be harnessing and leveraging technology to advance its work.

Some aspects of these scenarios are logical extensions of social work's historic role and social justice mission. The need for social workers will continue to increase as the demand for social work services grows as a result of existing demographic, economic, and political trends. Whether delivered through direct person-to-person contact or through technology, behavioral health services will continue to be provided primarily by social workers, who will continue to have a positive impact on individuals, families, and communities. This is a future that will require change but will feel familiar to most.

Other aspects of the scenarios will require a fundamental rethinking of social work's role in all professions. As critical thinkers and system navigators, social workers are well positioned to provide leadership across disciplines including business, government, and the social sector. Social workers will continue to be leading providers of services in the education, juvenile and criminal justice, health, and behavioral health systems, but they will also be technologists, government officials, and corporate CEOs, bringing social work values to all aspects of society and using social work thinking to solve some of the greatest challenges facing the country.

Although it is not possible to predict with any level of certainty what the future of social work will hold, these scenarios provide insights that the Futures Task Force hope will be built on as CSWE undertakes its strategic planning effort in the year ahead. Some of the implications and recommendations identified in this report are relevant across all four scenarios; others for only one or two. But by stretching our thinking through the scenario planning process, we hope that CSWE identifies new strategies or approaches that a more traditional (and linear) approach to planning would not have unearthed, thus creating new opportunities for CSWE and the social work profession as a whole.

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APPENDIX: KEY DRIVERS OF CHANGE
TRENDS AFFECT THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL WORK

In addition to the critical uncertainties identified in this report, numerous trends affecting the future of social work for which there is a fairly high degree of certainty were identified during the environmental scanning phase of the project. Given the high likelihood of these trends affecting the future of the profession, they were considered and integrated into the development of each of the scenarios.

For categorization, these trends have been divided into two groups: trends affecting society at large and trends specific to the social work profession.

Key Drivers of Change: Societal Level

Diversity, racism, and increasing intolerance in society. As the United States navigates a period of increasing racial and ethnic diversity (becoming a majority-minority country around 2050), the country is also experiencing an increasing intolerance of diversity and a resurgence of overt racism, White supremacy, White nationalism, homophobia, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and general vitriol toward the "other." In addition to the profession's historic focus on advancing social justice and social welfare, there will be opportunities for social work to take a leadership role in countering the growing polarization and vision in society by creating opportunities for civil discourse and identification of common ground; undertaking research on the "science of racism" and identifying predictors and evidence-based prevention and change strategies; and by undertaking efforts to increase diversity and inclusion within the profession itself (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender).

Income inequality and class separation. Another major division in our society is the growing inequality between rich and poor and the implications of this wealth divide on so many of the issues social workers address every day, such as disparities in health, environment, education, housing, and employment (including addressing the intersectionality between income inequality and racial/ethnic identity). Income inequality provides an opportunity for the social work profession to bridge the policy/practice divide (macro/micro). Addressing the root causes of income inequality will require changes in policy and politics. Addressing the impacts of income inequality will require interventions at the individual, family, and community levels. All are necessary, and none are sufficient on their own.

Complexity of health and the changing health-care system. Health and health care will continue to be among the largest issues facing society, with an increasing percentage of discretionary spending being allocated to this sector. In addition to advocating for increased access to health care and the critical role social workers play within the health system (e.g., integrated care delivery, clinical behavioral health care, case management, discharge planning), the profession has an opportunity to take an increased leadership role in addressing the social determinants of health (which account for up to 80% of health outcomes). Social workers are well positioned to improve health outcomes, eliminate health disparities, and reduce health-care expenditures.

Longevity and growth of the aging population. Advances in health care and wellness are contributing to increased longevity and the exponential growth of the older population. Although medical care can enable these advances, it is also resulting in a growing gap between our ability to help people live longer

and their quality of life. The Baby Boom generation, or at least segments of this generation, has prided itself on its independence and relative wealth. As they age, they will need assistance in navigating their new realities. An estimated 20% to 25% of the Baby Boom population is childless, raising questions as to who will care for these individuals as they age and are no longer able to care for themselves. The Baby Boom generation's desire for independence, along with the shift in the health system to provide more ambulatory care, will require social workers to connect the aging population to community-based systems and supports (which may not exist in all communities). Beyond the impact on the senior population directly, social workers will need to address caregiver and economic burdens as well.

Information technology and big data. Technology and informatics will continue to progress and become integrated into people's lives. Wearables, apps, and smart home features will continue to grow in use broadly and in health and behavioral health applications specifically. Through passive and active tracking of individuals and populations, social workers will be able to use big data to plan individualized treatment plans and target large-scale prevention measures and interventions. The continued rise in virtual connectedness has the potential to lead to a concomitant rise in physical isolation and depression. Social workers will need to learn to adopt and adapt technology for their needs and those of the people they serve. They will also need to continue to use research and advocacy to push back when technology could cause harm.

Environmental change. Impacts from environmental changes are anticipated to continue to accelerate in coming years. Sea level rise will lead to displacement of whole communities, while shifts in weather and temperature may lead to crop failure and food and water scarcity. Rising temperatures will also give rise to the spread of mosquito-borne and tropical diseases. The impacts will be felt the most by the poor and those on the edge of poverty. Social workers will need to lead and work with integrated teams in disaster management agencies to address crises. Environmental refugees will become a growing population in need of social work services. Social workers will also need to work at the state and federal levels to advocate for resources for those most affected by adverse changes.

Privatization. More traditionally public services are now being managed through private contractors. This is happening across all sectors from health to education to child welfare to utilities. This shift leads to more market-based decision making and an expectation for return on investment. Privatization could make responding to issues more rapid with a nimbler organization. However, result can also be lower access to public services for some individuals and groups. As the health and behavioral health systems move to a value-based rather than fee-for-service model, social workers will need to change advocacy efforts from specific reimbursement codes to showing value as part of a team. Social workers will need to leverage outcomes research to demonstrate the benefit to social work services and learn to address business concerns as well.

Future of work. The nature of the world of work is undergoing changes. After the economic downturn in 2007, many unemployed individuals gave up searching for work. The unemployment rate has gone down significantly since that time, but some people have still not rejoined the search; long-term unemployment could have an impact on an individual's psychological and economic well-being. Automation will continue to expand into more settings and roles, displacing workers. It is expected that the retirement age will continue to be pushed back, leading to more older adults in the workplace. Social workers need to be prepared to work with clients on financial capabilities, employment, education, and other issues related to economic well-being.

Key Drivers of Change: Specific to the Profession of Social Work

In addition to the larger societal challenges identified, the following trends specifically affecting the social work profession were also explored. The trends are listed in order of importance based on the results of a CSWE member survey.

Importance of engagement in the political process. Most of the issues of importance to social work are heavily shaped and affected by the political process. Social work should be playing a more active role in the political process (not just policy, but politics), by bringing the voice of social work to the political debate, informing the debate with evidenced-based science, supporting and engaging in grassroots advocacy, and running for political office. To truly advance social justice, social work needs to be more powerful in the political process (including preparing candidates for public office).

Impact of technology on social work practice. The use of technology in all forms of social work practice is changing how we provide services to our clients, as well as how we educate, supervise, monitor, and regulate services. How will we use technology responsibly with clients? How do regulatory standards need to change? How do technology practice standards need to continue to evolve? How will technology affect the client relationship and the social work workforce? How would social work change if Google, Amazon, or another tech company brought disruptive innovation to the profession?

Bridging the divide between policy and practice. The divisions that exist in the profession between macro and micro practice are seen as unhelpful and negatively affecting the power and identity of the profession. There is a growing understanding that both perspectives are necessary for advancing social justice over the short- and longer-term, and that the divide was harmful to the profession.

Building an integrated curriculum. Many other health professions have transitioned to an integrated curriculum with students learning from faculty in the field as well as in the classroom from the very beginning of their educational experiences. This approach makes a stronger link between didactic and clinical learning with the community serving as the classroom. Pedagogical research has shown the value of this approach, which should be explored (and potentially adopted) by social work.

The dominance of the health sector. As noted in the prior section, the health/health-care sector will continue to dominate the public's consciousness and government spending in the years ahead. Social work needs to determine whether it will lead or follow in this space, but it must recognize that integrated health care (behavioral and physical) will increasingly be the norm. If social work does not play a leadership role in leading interprofessional teams, redesigning the health-care system, providing behavioral health care, and providing case management and discharge planning, then other professions (including nursing and community health workers) will. Social work will also be challenged by the peer support workforce, which will comprise a larger segment of the health workforce in the future. To be successful in this space, social work will soon need to learn to speak the language of the health-care system and make a choice about whether to lead or follow, before the profession gets squeezed out.

Navigating the ideology of social work. The language and political ideology of many social workers can be polarizing to some of the communities in which social workers need to operate. The language of social justice may not resonate in the business community or more conservative communities, particularly in rural America. The absolutist nature within social work can be problematic when working with some populations (e.g., you must believe in our definition of social justice or you are unethical, prejudiced, or just wrong). Social work needs to be able to operate in these diverse communities

without judgment if the profession is to make progress toward shared goals and engage in civil discourse.

Implementing evidence-based practice. There has been a dramatic increase in the volume of practice-relevant science. All social workers will need to possess strong critical thinking skills to review, assess, and apply new developments in science and evidence-based practice to their work. Although social work has always been (and will continue to be) a mix of the academic and experiential, there could be increased expectations for adoption of practice guidelines and protocols as means for application of evidence-based practice in the future. Social workers will need to know what works and what does not, teach to evidence-based practice, and apply the knowledge gained. A shift to evidence-based practice will require an increased focus on research in the profession (including efforts to ensure equity in research funding and investments in scientists of color) and will also probably result in new payment models linked to evidenced-based practice.

Increasing need for financial and fundraising skills. With the decline in government support for the types of safety-net services that social workers provide, social workers will need to be more active in fundraising and philanthropy, including the need for stronger grant-writing, communication, and financial management skills.

Demonstrating social ROI. With the rise of outcome-based measures of performance, social work will need to develop evidence-based social metrics that show the impact of social work interventions from a social outcome perspective, beyond just financial impact. Without social metrics, only financial metrics will be used, which will not provide a full picture of the value of investments in social work.

The increasing focus on specialization in practice. The increasing focus on specialization within the profession provides challenges as well as opportunities for the future of social work. There are concerns that the increase in specialization could result in the loss of social workers' generalist perspective and broad set of core competencies. At the same time, there are also concerns that social work is at a competitive disadvantage with other professions that provide more specialty training (e.g., employers are more likely to hire someone with focused or specialty training in a specific approach, area, or population). If this trend continues, social workers may need increased specialization to remain competitive in the workplace.

The power of the for-profit sector. The power of the corporate sector continues to increase, and much of government policy is shaped to benefit the business community. As government funding continues to decrease, and the power of the for-profit sector continues to grow, how will social work influence and provide leadership in the business community? To influence the corporate sector, social workers will need to be serving on boards of directors, in key corporate leadership roles, and in key sectors (e.g., finance) where there are few social workers today. Social workers will need to have a better understanding of business and finance and will need to learn to work and exert influence from within the corporate sector, rather than simply seeing the corporate sector as the enemy.

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