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What role will social work have played in the opioid epidemic?

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The modern U.S. “opioid crisis” has received increased attention from government and public health officials (Denigan-Macauley, 2018; Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2011; see also Gomes et al., 2018). In response, many states have developed awareness campaigns and expanded their prevention and treatment approaches to individuals, families, and communities. Further, there has been increased social and political attention to the dramatic rise in overdose deaths, as well as rates of opioid use by White, suburban and rural communities (e.g., Macy, 2018) – though opioid-related deaths are also rising and even higher in some states for Native Americans, Blacks, and Latinos (see James & Jordan, 2018).

Despite prioritization of this important issue, there is still much work to be done – not least because of the interplay between the opioid epidemic and problems in mental health (Katz et al., 2013). These matters are only made more pressing, given the current COVID-19 pandemic – a period in which we’ve seen increased rates of substance use and overdose-related deaths, and adversely impacted mental health outcomes (see Ahmad et al., 2021; O’Connor et al., 2020). Social workers are in a unique position to intervene and to demonstrate leadership and ingenuity during these difficult times. Often estimated as one of, if not the largest group of professionals in the field of behavioral healthcare (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), social workers are often the frontline providers of behavioral health services (see generally Shier et al., 2019) and help shape related policies. We have likewise demonstrated through our research and scholarship an ability to analyze and critique assumptions about the nature of drug use and drug treatments (e.g., Dunleavy, 2018a, 2018b; Wakefield, 2017), to develop novel and promising treatment modalities (e.g., Garland et al., 2017), and to appreciate the broader sociopolitical context in which these issues reside (e.g., McNeece, 2003).

It's in this spirit, which we've raised the question in the title of this editorial: "What role will social work have played in the opioid epidemic?". This is meant to give pause, to reflect on the extent to which social work has helped - and at times harmed - those impacted by opioid use and misuse thus far, and to give consideration as to how the profession will aid going forward. We present the articles in this special issue in this spirit.

In this special issue, you will find that social workers are making the connections necessary to engage communities and municipalities in ending the opioid crisis – from conducting stone soup sessions in rural towns, working with Promotores in Latinx communities, and collaborating with Black and Latinx to develop faith-based approaches. The articles speak to the vulnerabilities and social determinants faced by people and their families resulting from the effects of opioid use and discuss effective policies and programs on strategies for harm reduction and rapid access to medication assisted treatments (MAT). In addition, creative educational opportunities for social workers have been developed to enhance the workforce's capacity to better train new social workers, to improve interdisciplinarity among teams, and include peer and community support. Across populations of people, from youth to families, whether in community, churches, primary care centers, community behavioral health clinics, interdisciplinarity models are being developed to enhance our capacity. We hope these articles will inspire us all to continue to develop creative and innovative ways to meet the daily demands of the opioid crisis and to strive towards taking an active role in restoring our communities.

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