

NASW – Michigan Flint Water Disaster Task Force Recommendations

As the water disaster in Flint continues and the recovery process begins, NASW-Michigan, our members, and our partners remain committed to restoration. In Flint, members continue to make critical home visits to the most vulnerable families to provide water, filter installations, lead education, and other services under the coordination of *Crossing Water*. The chapter continues our involvement and support of the local effort to organize and plan relief, including consideration of short and long-term impacts on behavioral health and the social determinants of health. In Lansing, the chapter continues to support funding appropriations and advocating for the resources necessary to mitigate the disaster. Nationally, the chapter continues efforts to meet and talk with federal officials about concerns and requesting additional resources and coordination.

This is a complex issue with lasting consequences. The water disaster worsens, in many cases, already dire conditions faced by disenfranchised populations. Among those impacted are the vulnerable populations of central concern to the social work profession: low-income individuals and families; people who are homeless; older people; people with disabilities; people who are isolated, institutionalized, or otherwise at risk; and all exposed children. These populations may be among the most vulnerable and require special attention during immediate relief and recovery. Disaster creates trauma for entire communities by virtue of massive disorganization, disruption of infrastructure, and changes in customary leadership, which in the case of Flint played a role leading up to the disaster through an emergency manager. All of this trauma leads to grief and a sense of helplessness in individuals, families, and small groups owing to losses, severe disruption, and frustrated attempts to obtain assistance and solve problems.

The Flint water disaster is a collective, community-wide traumatic event that has caused extensive infrastructure damage and human injury with widespread social and personal disruption. Even though an immense emergency response system of voluntary and government organizations has become involved, if the disaster is undermitigated or significantly mismanaged a second disaster will occur. The "second disaster" phenomenon is cited as creating more long-lasting and severe stressors for those impacted than the original issue (Cohen & Ahearn, 1980; Myers, 1994).

In an effort to support the prevention and relief of the harmful consequences from the Flint water disaster and enhance responsiveness of relief and recovery efforts, **NASW-Michigan recommends that:**

1. Flint should immediately be declared a disaster zone.
2. Coordination should take place through a federally and locally managed command center according to **National Incident Management System (NIMS) protocol**.
3. The government (state and federal) should immediately mobilize the appropriate resources, including those necessary to construct a temporary water system that will provide clean water to each household.

4. All plumbing systems, public and private, should be tested by qualified EPA sanctioned officials, not residents, at the state and federal government's expense.
5. All pipes and plumbing fixtures in Flint's system that contain lead, or are otherwise toxic, harmful to humans, or unusable, whether on public or private property, should be replaced immediately at the state and federal government's expense.
6. Control of Flint's government should be fully restored to its elected officials immediately.
7. In order to prevent future crises, PA 436, the law empowering appointed Emergency Managers, should be repealed immediately.

As the planning, relief, and recovery process unfolds, **the following must be incorporated:**

- Ensure access and provision of mental health and social services to residents.
- Incorporate the 20-point plan authored by the NAACP. <http://www.naacp.org/press/entry/naacp-releases-20-point-list-of-priorities-to-address-the-needs-of-flint-re>
- Systematically provide door-to-door services, including water delivery, food, testing, filter installation, and educational materials.
- Provide trauma-specific interventions to all students in Flint area schools to maximize their educational outcomes.
- Implement a confidentiality protocol to protect the residents of Flint being served by various service entities.

It is critical to develop a team of well-trained disaster professionals committed to effective interdisciplinary and interorganizational collaboration in disaster response, at both the administrative and direct services levels, including consideration of the following:

- Give attention to the special and critical training, stress management, and support needs of disaster workers in all capacities, from administrative to field staff, and the need to support their self-care.
- Pay residents/youth wages for relief efforts to bolster the local economy.
- Incorporate the presence, commitment, and leadership of social workers in the planning, immediate relief, and recovery process:
 - Of all the allied health and human services professions, social work is uniquely suited to interpret the context of this disaster, to advocate for effective services, and to provide leadership in essential collaborations among institutions and organizations;
 - Individuals, families, groups, neighborhoods, organizations, schools, interorganizational networks, and whole communities require intervention;
 - Disaster assistance must be construed holistically, encompassing the physical, developmental, psychological, emotional, educational, social, cultural, and spiritual needs of Flint residents;

- o Respected disaster response modalities readily translate to the language of empowerment and classic, generalist social work practice.

We respectfully submit these recommendations, along with our pledge of full support and assistance in implementation. We stand ready to collaborate with local, state, and federal partners and allies to implement these recommendations. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact us at 517-487-1548 or via email at policy@nasw-michigan.org. Thank you for your time. We look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

NASW-Michigan Flint Water Disaster Task Force

Maxine Thome, Ph.D., LMSW, MPH, Executive Director - National Association of Social Workers – Michigan (NASW-Michigan)

Allan Wachendorfer, LLMSW, Director of Public Policy - National Association of Social Workers – Michigan (NASW-Michigan)

Donna Secor Pennington, LMSW, Michigan Association of School Social Workers (MASSW)

Dr. Otrude N. Moyo, Social Work Department – University of Michigan-Flint.

Beverly Davidson, LMSW, IMH-E (III) - Infant Mental Health Specialist

Michael A. Dover, M.S.S.W., Ph.D., LMSW - School of Social Work, Cleveland State University

(Based in part on: Social Work Speaks, 10th Edition: NASW Policy Statement on Disasters)