

Meeting the Grand Challenge to **Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment**

Policy Recommendations

- Strengthen the social safety net to reduce disaster risk.
- Proactively respond to environmentally induced migration and displacement.
- Extend equity-oriented rural and urban resilience policies and center marginalized communities in adaptation planning.

Introduction

The Grand Challenge for Social Work (GCSW) to [Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment](#) works to promote and support social workers, aligned professionals, and their professional organizations as they grow their commitments to urgently advance climate and environmental justice. Calls for climate action resonate across levels of practice where social workers are embedded, including within the GCSW campaign expansion to [Go•Grander](#). While realizing that “[there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all](#)” (IPCC, 2023, p. 89), social workers must address persistent social and structural inequities that contribute to the changing climate (Forbes et al., 2023).

Policy Recommendations

In what follows, we introduce key policies relating to (1) strengthening the social safety net to reduce disaster risk; (2) proactively responding to environmentally induced migration and population displacement; and (3) extending equity-oriented rural and urban resilience policies while centering marginalized communities in adaptation planning. Using these policy areas, we advocate for social workers having greater influence in shaping related policies while centering social, climate, and environmental justice.

Two policy frameworks of note mentioned throughout the next section are the Green New Deal and the Inflation Reduction Act. In 2019, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Edward J. Markey proposed a congressional resolution known as the Green New Deal. Though the resolution was not passed, [it provides a blueprint for social work intervention](#). It proposed a far-reaching, multi-systemic approach to addressing climate change that included policy proposals related to environmental health, racial justice, housing equity, and investments in educational and social programs. [The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022](#)

(with newer provisions adopted in 2023) is considered the most significant climate-focused legislation in the U.S. The IRA was vastly influenced by the movement for the Green New Deal but with a less explicit focus on the social dimensions. It works primarily through infrastructure investments and tax credits with some focus on disadvantaged environmental justice communities through grants to aid community-led programs addressing climate and environmental injustices. Social workers can advocate to strengthen these policies, along with offshoots of them, at federal, state, and local levels in ways that favor holistic, intersectional approaches and center the voices of marginalized communities.

1. Strengthen the social safety net to reduce disaster risk and climate impacts.

Impactful and timely climate action requires clear goals, measurements, and coordination across levels of government and beyond. Policies must create a protective net that can serve to reduce disaster risk, especially among those [systematically marginalized groups](#). [This requires anticipating needs, reducing emissions, thereby mitigating the cause of many climate impacts, and offering various supports and multifaceted climate-resilient development inclusive of leadership and voices from within affected communities.](#)

We recommend that social workers advocate for and endorse policies that recognize the intersection of social and environmental issues. It is imperative to [bolster the social safety net \(basic needs, food, housing, healthcare, guaranteed work/income\) to improve the capacities of disadvantaged groups before a disaster strikes](#) so impacted communities are better positioned to withstand both socioeconomic and environmental disasters. Social workers are well-situated to lead efforts in this sphere because the profession works at the intersection of environmental and social problems, the role of welfare, and understands the significance of placing communities most affected at the center of designing such policies.

Further, social workers should support policy interventions with expansive and cross-cutting frameworks such as the [Community Mental Wellness & Resilience Act](#) which would create and fund programs aimed at serving the mental health needs of communities in the wake of disasters and other climate-change-related stressors. Social workers are well positioned to develop programming using a community-based mental health approach and clinical social workers can be first responders when it comes to therapeutic interventions that address the trauma and mental health stressors that accompany disasters and extreme weather events. Further, we recognize that there are barriers to accessing mental health care, particularly in underserved environmental justice communities and can work

to improve accessibility through policies like the CMWRA. Advocating for the passage of this act is a natural fit with social work values.

In addition to building a strong safety net to improve capabilities at the community level to withstand disasters, we also recommend that community expertise take center stage in evidence-based approaches to disaster risk reduction and climate readiness. Evidence-based and evidence-informed practices are central to our policy priorities, ensuring that evidence is generated through meaningful community involvement and remains pertinent to their priorities and needs. Voices and experiences of groups considered vulnerable, such as older adults, children, minoritized groups, those with physical and mental health ailments, those struggling without homes, and the poor, need to inform interventions rather than relying on top-down approaches.

Improved access to physical (such as safe and affordable housing and healthcare) and social (such as early warning and community response systems) infrastructure, coupled with improved access to information and building disaster self-efficacy, all while centering equity across multiple dimensions, are localized initiatives that social workers can advance toward creating an evidence base for interventions. [Social workers need to continue advocating to recenter core aspects of the Green New Deal](#), and endorse efforts such as the [People's Charter for an Ecosocial World, which calls on the United Nations to co-create policies that promote sustainable well-being](#).

2. Develop policies that proactively respond to environmentally induced migration and population displacement.

Many Indigenous Americans are internally displaced within what is now identified as the United States through [genocide, cultural assimilation, and forced removal](#). The Indigenous American way of living, knowing, and practicing their culture, including stewarding lands and waterways, was and continues to be violently disrupted by settler colonialism. The land they were forcefully relocated to as well as their ancestral lands, have suffered from various climate impacts including extreme weather events, droughts, land degradation, and sea level rise. Today, [the federal government has begun awarding grants to some tribes to plan and develop community decision-making processes to relocate their homelands due to sea level rise](#). On the other hand, some tribal nations cannot access clean, safe, and potable water even if a water source is adjacent to or fully within their boundaries, because, with the exception of the Clean Water Act, water law generally is regulated at the State level. For federally recognized sovereign tribal nations, this leads to particularly complex water management issues.

Recognizing that the climate crisis, along with associated conflict and violence, is displacing multitudes, necessitates that social workers understand and acknowledge these linkages and engage in responsive actions. The Green New Deal framework explicitly includes "migrant communities" within its definition of frontline and vulnerable communities and calls for justice and equity by creating mechanisms that address historical and contemporary oppression while preventing current and future oppression among these communities. This necessitates the large-scale scale, multi-faceted goal of building resilience to climate as well as other chronic stressors through actions including but not limited to infrastructure development, risk reduction, eliminating toxins from the environment, developing clean energy, weatherized and efficient buildings, solidarity with workers in the food systems, and restoration of fragile ecosystems. The IRA addresses large-scale climate action (such as innovations and expansion in clean energy use, rural economic development through support for agricultural producers, earmarking Block Grant programs for community-based organizations, and emergency drought relief, planning, and technical assistance grants to indigenous communities) to a large extent but does not name immigrant and displaced communities beyond local displacement. Given the historical emissions of the U.S. and its role in the global climate crisis, we recommend that the next iteration of the Inflation Reduction Act include recommendations from the Green New Deal to expand support beyond the U.S. borders toward supporting global communities before and after they have entered the U.S.

To develop and advance policies targeting environmentally induced migration and population displacement, we recommend social workers to work with:

- colleagues globally to press the U.S. and other high-emitting countries to assist low and middle-income countries with adaptation and loss & damage commitments as part of their historic responsibility;
- immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons via migration rights organizations and Indigenous American community groups to examine multi-pronged strategies to humanize migration and displacement through formal recognition of climate refugee status; and
- their local client communities to understand the interconnected nature of economic, social, and environmental challenges and to include their input in decision-making and planning efforts.

3. Extend equity-oriented rural and urban resilience policies and center marginalized communities in adaptation planning.

Within the last five years, the policy framework toward climate and environmental justice has slowly advanced toward an equity-focused prioritization. The Green New Deal (GND) was [much-politicized for arguing for co-privileging the environment with human, labor, and community rights and well-being](#), demonstrating the siloing of these issues that often curtails coalition building. Since then, [multiple cities have embraced elements within the GND resolution](#). Notably, a significant thrust has been to center the social aspects of the GND and focus on job creation and building coalitions toward pro-equity policies, [illuminating spaces where social workers can play a significant role in connecting communities and socio-environmental priorities](#). Many of the GND-related activities have been led by local environmental justice organizations and frontline communities and provide opportunities for coalition building and [multisolving](#).

The IRA has been [critiqued for being insufficient in its environmental and climate justice provisions, not explicitly centering communities impacted most by climate and environmental injustices, and relying primarily on false market-based solutions](#). Social work policy practitioners should recognize this gap and examine ways to make this large climate policy more just and responsive to urban and rural communities that are on the frontlines of environmental and climate impacts. They can also draw from other policy initiatives, such as the Federal government's [Justice 40 Initiative. Justice 40 has the goal of transferring 40% of the overall benefits](#) of Federal investments in climate action, such as sustainable housing, clean energy, workforce development, key infrastructure, and pollution reduction activities toward environmental justice communities. These programs require community consultation to determine the direction of benefits and priorities. Social workers can play a key role here in liaising with communities they are already embedded in to leverage these opportunities.

Conclusion

These climate and environmental justice policy recommendations align with action necessary for interconnected global health and well-being of our planet and people. We recommend that social workers [advocate to retain the social action components of these federal policies and resolutions and to ensure community voices remain centered](#). We recommend that climate action and environmental justice be continually acknowledged as the social justice issues that they are and not ones remedied by narrow technological and market-based tools.

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About the Grand Challenges for Social Work

The Grand Challenges for Social Work was launched by the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare in 2016 to harness the ingenuity, expertise, dedication, and creativity of individuals and organizations within the field of social work and beyond to champion “social progress powered by science.” Additional information on the Grand Challenges may be found at GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org.

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