

Meeting the Grand Challenge to Harness Technology for Social Good  
**Social Workers Support Vulnerable Community Members’  
 Rights to Access Safe, Beneficent and Effective AI**

Policy Recommendations	Funding and Regulatory Possibilities
Make AI policy development and applications inclusive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create block grants and other funding mechanisms for including local communities and stakeholders in the AI development and deployment process.</li> <li>• Develop local and state Citizen AI Review Boards modeled after the highly successful Citizen Complaint Review Boards which monitor and protect citizens from police misconduct.</li> </ul>
Prioritize AI literacy education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase funding for programs such as “Computer Science for All”, applications of AI risk management frameworks, and AI literacy as well as AI teacher training and development.</li> </ul>
Prioritize human-centric approaches.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek funding through NIH and NSF as well as join NIH/NSF programs in the U.S. In Europe, seek funding through the European Research Executive Agency (Research and Artificial Intelligence) for research on human-centered AI development, prioritizing human rights, accountability, and equality in a digital-powered society.</li> </ul>

**Overview**

AI systems have become pervasive in the life choices and livelihoods of people around the world, with profound impacts on human well-being that are not well understood, and include unintended consequences that are difficult to predict, challenging our ability to respond in a way that promotes the social good<sup>1</sup>. High concentration of control over AI systems and its development has led to a greater focus on efficiencies and shareholder value over social good in the United States and abroad. The paucity of stakeholder inputs into AI utilities and the opaqueness of data sets that power AI have led to a lack of public accountability, as well as a lack of accessibility for vulnerable communities. Despite generative AI garnering significant attention with the release of ChatGPT last year, only 14% of US adults report having tried it.<sup>2</sup> Social workers are well positioned to help individuals, organizations, and communities understand and protect their digital rights, while promoting their inclusion in the digital world. Social workers should support development

of legislation enhancing guardrails, closing the digital divide, and protecting the rights for vulnerable groups using AI, such as the White House's AI Bill of Rights, and the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), while also advocating for increased funding to develop, digital awareness, and AI literacy.<sup>3</sup> Three broad policy recommendations are made on the basis of our review: (1) make AI policy development and applications inclusive, (2) prioritize AI literacy education, and (3) prioritize human-centric approaches.

## Policy Recommendations

### 1. Make AI policy development and applications inclusive.

- Where public and social service systems, such as public safety, cash assistance and benefits, unemployment, etc. are deploying AI assessment tools, and algorithmic decision making, stakeholders and those affected should be involved in system development.
- Social work can provide advocacy strategies for engaging underserved communities in providing feedback on the design and implementation of AI regulations, policies and services impacting their well-being, choices, and capacity for self-determination.
- Social workers can serve as a conduit to ensure that citizens understand these new protections as well as their rights and opportunities, while also conveying to policy makers and technologists the needs and aspirations of those vulnerable citizens.
- Demystify complex and opaque AI-driven technologies while also advocating for legislation, regulation and oversight that render digital systems of governance, care, employment, and education, comprehensible, navigable, and accessible

#### *In Context: Social Workers promote inclusive AI policy and applications*

The social worker role, as educator, catalyst and leader, is illustrated in iterative, multi-stakeholder collaborations that build the capacities of vulnerable communities, groups and individuals to engage in participative AI policy development and implementation. Social workers are well positioned to serve as collaborators and champions of 'humans in the loop' providing training, and a variety of learning opportunities (i.e., workshops, podcasts, online education, social media seminars) that will assist vulnerable citizens in engaging fully and confidently with AI. The increasing pace of technological change challenges the processing power of 'humans in the loop' and must be met through a range of organizational, institutional, arrangements aimed at enhancing human voices and values.

For instance, a social worker engages with a community-based advocacy organization that is using big data to predict the emergent mental health needs of a growing population of

individuals experiencing homelessness, and works with advocates, policy makers and service recipients to assist with the big data strategy, data privacy, storage and processing challenges, in tandem with the need to ground any advocacy solutions in the community capacity, and the advocacy agency's social justice and beneficence values.

## **2. Prioritize AI literacy education.**

- Ensure AI literacy education (AI applications, models, and ethical issues) is included in all K-12 curricula.
- Provide funding for developing new applied knowledge on AI use, including a multiplicity of use-cases in a variety of public, nonprofit, and private service settings to inform best-practices curricula for social workers, both in their own use of AI systems, and to assist clients theirs.
- Include relevant interdisciplinary and AI design curricula under the broad umbrella of AI literacy.
- Develop ethical decision-making frameworks, models and examples, using capabilities ethics, human rights, and algorithmic justice approaches.

### *In Context: Social workers engage learners in the safe, ethical and effective use of AI*

In concert with other professionals, social workers can provide education on AI privacy rights, safety measures, risk management, technology literacy, and basic advocacy strategies for vulnerable communities. They can also provide feedback on the design and implementation of AI regulations, policies and services. Social workers can serve as a conduit to ensure that citizens understand these new protections, their rights and opportunities, while also conveying to policy makers and technologists' citizen needs and aspirations. Social workers frequently serve as translators and connectors in partnerships bridging disciplines and communities, ensuring the development of systems that are effective in delivering safeguards (i.e., data privacy, algorithmic fairness, algorithmic accountability) for the human rights and well-being of vulnerable citizens.

A relevant use case involves social workers acting as members of an AI development design team and operating from a community-based organization. The social workers assume educator, and co-trainer roles with other professionals in introducing community stakeholders to product design principles, steps to reduce algorithmic bias as well as policy advocacy strategies, including focused storytelling, personal disclosure, and raising public awareness.

### 3. Prioritize human-centric approaches.

- Aim to spur the development of AI-driven systems, and supportive policies that contribute to greater human potential and well-being, grounded in safety, human rights, and social justice principles.
- Humans are treated as teammates of the AI and directly engaged in both performance and product.
- Human learning is enhanced.
- Humans derive meaning from the work; their involvement is perceived to be complementary to the machine's contribution and meaningful.
- The voice and participation of vulnerable groups looped into the design and adaptation of human-centric technologies.<sup>4&5</sup>

*In Context: Social workers model and foster high-touch, values-based human-AI collaborations grounded in ethical principles and interdisciplinary practices.*

Social workers can help engage vulnerable individuals, groups and communities with the growing web of AI-driven technologies and supportive policies as co-designers and active participants: "...as the world moves online, policy implementation that doesn't center citizen accessibility will increasingly lead to undersubscribed benefit programs or laws that, in practice, look very different than what their drafters intended."<sup>6</sup> Drawing upon their experience working in interdisciplinary collaborations, social workers can partner with technologists, policy makers, engineers, and other professionals, to develop shared problem understandings upon which to develop AI strategies that fill service gaps and augment human capabilities.

By virtue of their values-based professional formation, including their interdisciplinary orientation and experience, social workers are well positioned to serve as 'humans in the loop' to explain, educate and provide training that will assist vulnerable citizens in engaging fully, safely and confidently with AI. Social workers can employ their skills to actively solicit the feedback, imagination and creativity of vulnerable citizens in beneficial human-AI collaborations. The aim is to spur the development of AI-driven systems, and supportive policies that contribute to greater human potential and well-being, grounded in safety, human rights, and social justice.

Consider, for example, AI embodied in semi-autonomous socially assistive robots serving as part-time companions and caregivers for older adults, supplementing the

contributions of resource-constrained family members and staff at a residential facility. Social workers employed in the facility could train family caregivers and staff while interfacing with engineers and data scientists engaged with the robot's learning and performance. Guided by human rights-centered ethical precepts, the social worker serves as a bridge between the technology designers' and end-users' perspectives. The result will be a more effective deployment of technology and policy that serves to augment the older adult's capabilities, while also advancing their rights.

## Authors

John Bricout, *University of Texas at San Antonio* ([john.bricout@utsa.edu](mailto:john.bricout@utsa.edu))

Lauri Goldkind, PhD, *Fordham University* ([goldkind@fordham.edu](mailto:goldkind@fordham.edu))

## 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](http://GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org).

## References

<sup>1</sup>Havrda, M., & Klocek, A. (2023). Well-being impact assessment of artificial intelligence—A search for causality and proposal for an open platform for well-being impact assessment of AI systems. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 99, 102294.

<sup>2</sup>Pew Charitable Trust, November 2022. What the data says about Americans' views of artificial intelligence <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/11/21/what-the-data-says-about-americans-views-of-artificial-intelligence/>

<sup>3</sup>Peschke, S. G., & Peschke, L. (2022). Artificial intelligence and the new challenges for EU legislation. *Yıldırım Beyazıt sssssHukuk Dergisi*, (2022-2), 1267-1292.

<sup>4</sup>Kolbjørnsrud, V. (2024). Designing the Intelligent Organization: Six Principles for Human-AI Collaboration. *California Management Review*, 66(2), 44-64.

<sup>5</sup>Sadeghian, S., Uhde, A., & Hassenzahl, M. (2024). The Soul of Work: Evaluation of Job Meaningfulness and Accountability in Human-AI Collaboration. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 8(CSCW1), 1-26.

<sup>6</sup>Tate Ryan-Mosley, MIT Technology Review, November-December, 2023, "Government can't automate everything", p.50.