

## **Ebola: Social Work Practice Issues**

In our diverse roles as social workers, and across our various settings, we promote well-being and resourcefulness, safety and calm during times of crisis.

Social workers practice in hospitals, emergency departments, and public health clinics, likely with families and communities grieving the loss of loved ones to Ebola in their home country. We work in clinics with clients and patients who may express concern about their own health or public safety, as well as in settings with persons struggling with mental health concerns now intensified by news of the epidemic.

With public health crises such as Ebola, clients may be facing fear and anxiety, stigma and discrimination, grief and bereavement, trauma or even quarantine, as a result of the outbreak. Social workers can synthesize what has been learned from past disasters and public health crises; build upon existing resources to ensure support for individuals and communities affected by this challenging health problem.

## **How can we help our clients manage their fears?**

Many people are concerned and worried about their own safety, the safety of the broader community, and the potential impact of this virus. Many struggle with uncertainty and the unknown, helplessness and fear, and some with a range of deeper feelings and unique issues.

We need to respond to fears both expressed and perceived. As social workers, we should stress the fundamental importance of:

- Up-to-date and accurate information from trustworthy sources, which can lessen worries, clarify misinformation, and calm fears.
- A public health perspective on the disease, which emphasizes the well-being of the community.
- Opportunities to safely and comfortably discuss stress and anxiety, worries and fears about the epidemic.
- Approaches to self-care that promote safety, calm, connection, self-efficacy
- Enhancement of social networks, to maintain a sense of community and meaningful connection, and to reduce isolation

## **How can we education the broader community about the epidemic?**

As social workers, we need to be ambassadors of rational, fact-based approaches to the epidemic. Because Ebola sparks nearly universal fear, rumors and panic can spread faster than the virus. For instance, explaining that Ebola is spread only by direct contact with an individual who has active symptoms of the disease - and not by air, water, or food – can be reassuring to a worried public.

As social workers, we should educate our communities about the unintended consequences of Ebola policies not grounded in science. For example, we should speak out about the harmful

effects of mandatory quarantines, travel bans, and visa restrictions, which would significantly undermine U.S. and international efforts to provide critical supplies and qualified personnel and volunteers needed to address the Ebola crisis in Africa.

## **How do we respond to our own concerns?**

As social workers, we understand the ongoing need to take care of ourselves and especially now, each other, as we approach our work. This may include:

- Reflective self-care; keeping healthy and well rested.
- Staying actively connected with colleagues and support systems.
- Creating more opportunities for discussion and support among ourselves.
- Continuing our variety of engagements in social action and social justice work.

## **What can I do in my own practice setting?**

As social workers, we are guided by the core values of service to community, social justice and the dignity and worth of every person. We practice with integrity and competence. Social work professionals must be an active participant in the community response to the emerging public health crises. We can:

- Actively participate in public and private health care policy and planning bodies to ensure clients receive necessary and appropriate care with the guarantee of confidentiality and patient rights protections.
- Learn from history and take lessons from the fears and misinformation of HIV/AIDS – to better understand and confront the stigma and discrimination of persons perceived at-risk or in communities most affected by Ebola.
- Implement programs to educate colleagues and allied providers about the facts about Ebola.
- Know community resources and share information with clients and colleagues.

Across fields of practice, the Ebola crisis will call upon social workers to utilize the bio-psychosocial approach as we apply our training and skills to engage, support, and advocate for our clients, patients, and the larger communities in which we work and live.

As a global profession, we also support our fellow social workers overseas, who are working to reduce the psychological harm of the epidemic amidst extraordinary challenges. We stand with them.