



School Social Workers Stand Up for Migrant Children’s Human Rights: A Call to Action

Recently, our nation has engaged in inhumane practices such as the current administration’s zero tolerance policies that have resulted in the separation of children from families at the southern border. These same children, are now facing inhumane conditions in detention facilities. PBS Newshour (2019) recently highlighted the issues at our southern border following a law professor (Binford) who provided a first hand account of the deplorable conditions in the detention facilities in southern region of the United States. Malnourished children, lice and flu outbreaks, lack of medical care, children sleeping on the floor, and as many as 300 children in a cell with no adult supervision are some of the inhumane practices Binford witnessed (PBS Newshour, 2019). In addition, current threats of deportation by increasing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids are perpetuating intense fears and further traumatizing many immigrant children, youth and families with whom we work (Deonandan & Tatham, 2018; PBS Newshour, 2019).

Many children and their families seeking asylum have been forced to leave their homelands as a matter of survival. Choosing to leave your homeland and risking your life in hopes of providing stability, safety and the opportunity to meet one’s basic human needs is not a decision that is made easily nor should it be criminalized. Many have been displaced by international corporations through open pit mining, deforestation, or hydroelectric dams. These mega projects impact the ability for communities to survive and live off the land either through appropriation of the land, destruction of the land, or severe contamination of the land. Others are fleeing extreme poverty, gang violence or persecution in their countries (Deonandan & Tatham, 2018). Furthermore, victims of sex trafficking or slavery are in desperate need of asylum. In other cases, unaccompanied youth under the age of 18 traveling without their parents or an adult guardian may also be migrating for the same reasons as cited above or “may be in search of economic opportunities, to join parents or relatives already living in the destination country, or to flee abusive situations in their home countries” (Wilson, 2019, p.1). Although the specific reasons may vary, children, families & unaccompanied youth seeking asylum are often forced to make the difficult decision and make significant sacrifices to seek refuge in another country.

Recent news reports shed light on the reprehensible conditions of the migrant detention centers such as overcrowding, no access to clean clothes, soap, toothbrushes, blankets, etc. “As Department of Human Services and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) leadership have noted numerous times, our short-term holding facilities were not designed to hold vulnerable populations and we urgently need additional humanitarian funding to manage this crisis” (PBS Newshour, 2019, para. 2). These conditions are in direct violation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is the most widely ratified human rights convention in the global community, with the exception of the United States (UNICEF, n.d.). The convention specifically calls on states to ensure that children should grow up in a family environment, not be separated from their parents except when necessary due to abuse or neglect, and that states should take special care to promote the healthy development of the child (Mehta, 2015) while also providing an “atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding” (UNCRC, n.d.)

Furthermore, the UNCRC states that migrant children should receive “appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance” (UNCRC, n.d.).

As School Social Workers, we are on the frontlines working with migrant children and their families, including those with Temporary Protected Status and Dreamers (youth protected under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA]). We have an ethical responsibility to advocate against human rights violations. We bear witness to and understand the excruciating impact that fear, uncertainty and retraumatization has on an individual’s overall wellbeing, especially children. Thus, our ethical obligation is to mobilize and stand up for the rights of migrant children and their families. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, 2019), the fundamental constitutional protections of due process and equal protection embodied in our Constitution and Bill of Rights apply to every person, regardless of immigration status. Thus, **SSWAA is calling all School Social Workers to take action and fight for social justice.**

How can you protest against human rights violations and advocate for Dreamers, people with Temporary Protected Status, and those who are seeking asylum or remaining in the shadows whom you serve?

1. It is essential for communities to know their rights and to be informed of how to respond to any kind of enforcement activity. The National Immigrant Law Center has created “Know-Your-Rights” resources to help ensure that immigrants know what to do if they encounter ICE at home or at work which are translated into Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, and Korean: www.nilc.org/know-your-rights/.
2. Now that the House has passed the American Dream and Promise Act (H.R. 6), it is time to contact your U.S. Senators and urge them to pass S. 874 and S. 879 which would provide a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers brought to this country as minors, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, and people granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for humanitarian reasons. (NILC, 2019)
3. Respond to Action Alerts from SSWAA and your state school social work associations.
4. Educate yourself & others by sharing accurate information & facts from reputable resources whether in conversation with friends, family and colleagues or while you posting on social media.
5. Stay informed and do not let the issue drop. “The ACLU Immigrants’ Rights Project is dedicated to expanding and enforcing the civil liberties and civil rights of immigrants and to combating public and private discrimination against them” and they are a great resource to obtain up to date information as well as providing another venue to take action by signing onto their alerts (ACLU, 2019).
6. Incorporate human rights lessons into your social-emotional and equity work in the schools (The Advocates for Human Rights, n.d.).

Resources and References

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