Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment

Lawrence A. Palinkas, Ph.D.
Policy Conference for the Grand Challenges for Social Work
September 15, 2016
Global Climate Change

- Increase in world average temperature by 2100 from 1.5 to 5.8°C.
- Rising sea levels in the range of 0.26 to .98m thereby inundating low-lying areas and developing nations such as Tuvalu, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands, Maldives.
- More intense and more frequent extreme precipitation events over most of the mid-latitude land masses and wet tropical regions.
- Decrease in mean precipitation in many mid-latitude and subtropical dry regions, leading to drought conditions, increased risk of wildfires, and rising water insecurity.
- A significant decline in ocean ph levels and marine life as a food source.
Urbanization and environmental risk

- The majority of the U.S. population is already urban dwelling; by 2050, 90% of Americans will live in cities (United Nations Environment Programme, 2014).
- One third of the world’s urban population lives in informal settlements in environmentally marginal locations.
- Urbanization frequently has devastating environmental impacts on natural ecologies.
- Deteriorating urban infrastructure can lead to exposure to lead and other household hazards like mold, mildew, and pests.

A Flint, Michigan mother boils water due to lead contamination in the city’s water supply. –New York Times, 2015
Environmental change impacts

- Economic Impacts
  - Loss of income and livelihoods
  - Disaster-related damage to housing and infrastructure
  - Increased income disparities

- Health Impacts
  - Increase in vector-borne illness (Zika)
  - Lead poisoning (Flint, MI)
  - Increased health disparities

- Population Displacement
  - 500 - 600 million people are at risk from displacement by climate change (EJF, 2009).
  - Relocation of entire communities in U.S. (Shismaref, AK; Isle de St. Jean, LA)
  - Increased residential disparities
Social Work Grand Challenge

• Disaster preparedness and response
• Refugee resettlement and assistance
• Community-level organizing and development aimed at strengthening local and regional capacity to respond to the impacts of global environmental change, particularly in urban settings;
• Targeted policy, advocacy, and practice engagement in efforts to address underlying causes of environmental change.
Policy Recommendations

1. Adopt and implement an evidence-based approach to disaster risk reduction
2. Develop policies targeting environmentally induced migration and population displacement
3. Strengthen equity-oriented urban resilience policies and proactively engage marginalized communities in adaptation planning
Update on Grand Challenge

• Dissemination of Grand Challenge
  – International Conference on Social Work in Health and Mental Health – Singapore
  – SSWR – Washington DC
  – CSWE – Denver CO
  – International Social Work Conference - Manila
  – 6th European Conference for Social Work Research – Lisbon
  – 4th Annual Global Health Conference-2016 – Kaoshung, Taiwan
  – People and Climate Change: Vulnerability, Adaptation Social Justice – St Louis

• Disaster Preparedness and Response
  – Trainings in South Korea and Philippines using 3-tier model
  – Modeling of health impacts of disasters on Gulf Coast

• Partnerships
  – International Rescue Committee
  – Ayala Foundation