

Disasters and Pandemic Flu Planning for Social Work Education in Canada

Canadian Association of Deans and Directors of Social Work

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Disaster

The Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence (2004) recently stated that:

National emergencies are no longer rare in Canada. Consider a partial list of Canadian crises during the past few years: floods in Manitoba, the ice storm in eastern Ontario and Quebec, the E.coli outbreak in Walkerton, forest fires in British Columbia, Mad Cow in Alberta, SARS in Ontario, hurricanes in the Maritimes, the power blackout in Ontario, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States and the terrorist crisis since then.

As we have recently witnessed in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, when disaster hits a community, disruptions are widespread and affect all aspects of life, including the delivery of social services and the ability of educational institutions to continue to deliver programs. Social work programs and their students will undoubtedly be affected in numerous ways 1) disruption of courses; 2) closing of agencies in which practica are offered; 3) a requirement for social work interventions at the individual, family and community level to help ameliorate risk and reduce disruption. Further there is clearly a role for social workers in disaster and pandemic management and this provides new opportunities for learning for students in our programs.

Pandemic

Influenza is a highly contagious and common respiratory illness caused by a virus. It is characterized by cough, fever, sore throat, headache, aches, and malaise. Though unpleasant, most people recover within a week or two, without requiring medical attention. For elderly persons, the very young, and those with chronic medical conditions, flu can lead to life-threatening complications, such as pneumonia. Various provinces have created estimates of the impact of such a pandemic. British Columbia for instance suggests that the impact of an unmitigated pandemic will include: infection of up to 3/4 of the population; about 1/3 of the population will very seriously ill; about .5 million will require outpatient care; 2-17 thousand will require hospitalization; 800-6000 people will die; the health care system will experience a 25-50% reduction in available staff; and the aggregate economic cost could range from \$1-2.5 billion.

Guidelines

The purpose of these Disaster and Pandemic Flu Guidelines is to provide a road map for Faculties and Schools of Social Work in Canada, with the hope of limiting the impact of an emergency event by (1) managing the burden for students, staff and faculty; and (2) minimizing social and educational disruption caused by the pandemic or disaster. The following principles underlie these guidelines:

- Disruption to existing curricula should be minimized.
- Risks for students, faculty and staff are to be minimized in the context of on-going practicum placements and classroom training.
- Risks to the public are to be minimized in the context of practicum placements. Students in placements should only be asked / expected to perform tasks for which they are competent or receive appropriate supervision.

- Students and student organizations should be involved in detailed discipline-specific emergency planning.
- Students, faculty and staff should be informed of their legal and ethical rights throughout all stages of a pandemic or disaster – pre, during and post.

Student Rights and Services

- Faculties and Schools of Social Work should engage student representatives in the process of emergency planning.
- Students should obtain timely information about the current state of the influenza outbreak or disaster, estimated risks, decisions made by the university and practicum setting to maintain services, cancel aspects of service or close operations. Faculties and Schools should develop communication strategies both for acquiring this information from decision makers and those responsible for risk appraisal in responsible Ministries and the University and passing this information on to students. Communication strategies may include web-based messages and telephone communications.
- Students should be informed of their rights to safety, they should also be informed about the requirements to complete both academic courses and practicum hours in order to successfully obtain a university degree in social work.
- Students should not be coerced to put themselves at perceived risk to satisfy a program need, however, they are expected to follow the guidelines established by the school or the particular practicum setting which should adequately consider the safety and security of students and staff.
- Support services should be put in place for students who experience distress as a result of the anticipation or impact of the pandemic or disaster.

Student Practicum

- The profession as a whole has the responsibility to ensure that that decisions are made about the required number of practicum hours in the event of significant disruption of practica in a particular region due to an emergency event, that balances the need to ensure professional competence and student needs
- Faculties and Schools should clarify the legal rights and responsibilities of social work students in their province and ensure that students have liability coverage if their practicum arrangements or responsibilities change.
- Whereever possible, students should have the opportunity to continue their practicum training.
- Students should not generally be excluded from participating during emergency and crisis situations as such events provide vital opportunities for learning and an integral part of training is to deal with emergencies and crises.

- Participation in any part of the emergency will be allocated according to the competence of the student and the assessment of risk of the situation by the faculty or supervising clinician.

Course-Based Learning

- As much as feasible, the Faculty or School should continue to fulfill the goals and objectives of their programs and continue the educational program.
- Wherever possible, educators should ensure that new opportunities and new modalities be incorporated into the curriculum around the disaster for example assisting individuals, families and communities to cope with loss and disruption
- Educators should develop effective, expeditious, and efficient mechanisms to support learners through the crisis by ensuring adequate two-way communication, e.g. through email, web-assisted courses or other means.
- When alternate locations for teaching are necessary communication should be timely and facilitated by the Faculty or School.
- Opportunities for alternate means of curriculum delivery should be pursued, especially the use of distance technologies such as video conferencing.

Mutual Aid

Members of the Canadian Association of Deans and Directors of Social Work agree to engage in flexible models of reciprocity and assist one another in time of emergency, disaster or pandemic. Such assist may include:

- Registering students from affected schools in online courses
- Allowing students from affected schools to audit or cross register in courses

Establishment of a Liaison Group of Deans and Directors to assist in emergency.

Such a group will convene in the event of an emergency to assist the Deans/Directors of affected schools and consider the need for accommodation and flexibility including the possible modification of CASSW standards for the specific situation. The Liaison Group will take on the role of approaching the CASSW as required.