Social workers serve as, and build, bridges between individuals, communities, and macro systems. Our work is traditionally conducted face-to-face and often even hand-in-hand. Most social workers meet the definition of “essential worker” and thus have continued working under most state distancing orders. However, the personal safety precautions prudent to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) have forced many changes to how, where, and when so-social work happens.

You are reading this column at least five months into a new administration, and I wrote it just a month after angered election-outcome-deniers stormed the Capitol building in Washington, DC. We live in a deeply divided country. Social workers are the professionals best trained for the moment to listen to and help forge bridges between neighbors and sectors of the community who have grown apart. Especially with the COVID-19 pandemic waging into its second year, there are many needs to meet. This is the time to evaluate how we as a nation are doing and to consider what more can social work professionals do to shape our collective success. In this column, I review the Biden–Harris seven-point plan to beat COVID-19.

On January 21, 2021, they released the National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness, a seven-point plan to beat COVID-19 and get our country back on track (Biden, 2021). In it, the president outlines a roadmap to guide America out of the worst public health crisis in a century and presents an actionable plan across the federal government to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Our task as social workers will be to help implement, monitor, evaluate progress, and hold the administration accountable. As you read the general points of the following seven goals, ask yourself, “Where are we now?”

**GOAL 1: RESTORE TRUST WITH THE AMERICAN PEOPLE**

The elements for meeting goal 1 are related to building a clear and robust government-led effort. It includes establishing a national response structure that facilitates regular expert-led, science-based public briefings, data tracking, and targeted public health campaigns.

**GOAL 2: MOUNT A SAFE, EFFECTIVE, COMPREHENSIVE VACCINATION CAMPAIGN**

Multiple components are described as part of the national vaccination effort, an effort described as “one of the greatest operational challenges America has ever faced” (Biden, 2021, p. 38). The strategy includes getting shots into arms and getting vaccines to the communities that need them most while focusing on hard-to-reach and high-risk populations. The administration acknowledges that the complexity of vaccinating requires reliance on
robust data and its use in decision making. Therefore, a primary component of meeting this goal is bolstering data systems and transparency for vaccinations.

GOAL 3: MITIGATE SPREAD THROUGH EXPANDING MASKING, TESTING, TREATMENT, DATA, WORKFORCE, AND CLEAR PUBLIC HEALTH STANDARDS
Even after the national vaccination program ramps up, attention toward controlling the virus and its spread remains important. Primary features of the strategy in this area include expanding the U.S. public health workforce and increasing clinical care capacity for COVID-19, prioritizing therapeutics, and expanding testing and access to it.

GOAL 4: IMMEDIATELY EXPAND EMERGENCY RELIEF AND EXERCISE THE DEFENSE PRODUCTION ACT
The first year of response was hampered by supply shortages of end products such as personal protection equipment (PPE), tests, and vaccines and by disrupted supply chains and distribution channels. Therefore, the Biden–Harris administration included invoking the Defense Production Act, increasing emergency funding to states, and bolstering the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the national strategy. Within this goal area, the administration nested a priority to “buy American” with a tenet to expand American manufacturing capability to where the United States is not dependent on other countries in a crisis.

GOAL 5: SAFELY REOPEN SCHOOLS, BUSINESSES, AND TRAVEL WHILE PROTECTING WORKERS
Since the pandemic-initiated restrictions and stay-at-home orders were first adopted, we have all been wondering when we would go back to the places where we learn, work, and play. The new reality of social life requires protocols and equipment that cost money. Schools, especially public schools, need ongoing attention. Goal 5 includes provisions for a national strategy to support safely reopening schools. The stated goal was that a majority of schools would open safely within the first 100 days after the inauguration. This is one of few enumerated targets. Check your local community; has the federal government helped local districts meet this mark?

GOAL 6: PROTECT THOSE MOST AT RISK AND ADVANCE EQUITY, INCLUDING ACROSS RACIAL, ETHNIC, AND RURAL/URBAN LINES
The strategy aligns with the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW’s) ethical principle whereby social workers challenge social injustice and work for social change on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed people. The administration’s description of this goal acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated severe and pervasive health inequities among communities defined by race, ethnicity, geography, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other factors. Therefore, this strategy includes emphasis toward ensuring equitable access to critical COVID-19 tests, PPE, therapies, and vaccines and expanding access to high-quality health care. It also includes strengthening the social services safety net to address unmet basic needs.

GOAL 7: RESTORE U.S. LEADERSHIP GLOBALLY AND BUILD BETTER PREPAREDNESS FOR FUTURE THREATS
COVID-19 knows no borders, making global cooperation imperative. The strategy includes restoring U.S. leadership to the international COVID-19 response and advancing global health security and diplomacy.

A week after release of the Biden–Harris strategy, NASW released its 2021 Blueprint of Federal Social Policy Priorities (NASW, 2021). This document recommends specific actions aimed at addressing the COVID-19 crisis, promoting mental and behavioral health, eliminating systemic racism, and ensuring civil and human rights for all. In the section related to the pandemic, NASW calls on national leaders to do the following:

- Deploy the COVID-19 vaccine as quickly as possible, prioritizing essential workers (including social workers) and those at highest risk for infection or poor outcomes.
- Provide additional COVID-19 economic relief and stimulus packages; include direct payments to all adult Americans, including adult dependents.
- Implement a nationwide mask mandate and condition COVID-19 relief funding on implementation of effective mitigation strategies, including, but not limited to, the use of masks and social distancing as well as notice...
to and quarantine of close contacts of individuals infected with COVID-19 in schools and institutions of higher education.
• Create universal testing and contact tracing systems.
• Expand eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and mandate that states modify work requirements for SNAP eligibility for single adults.
• Extend unemployment benefits, including Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation, Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), and Pandemic Unemployment Compensation; expand PUA to individuals who are advised by a medical professional to leave their employment to protect a high-risk household family member.
• Place a sufficiently lengthy moratorium on housing evictions and home foreclosures, and provide rent forgiveness.
• Promptly increase the national minimum wage to $15 per hour.
• Increase access to capital for minority businesses.
• Take comprehensive action on student loan debt relief.
• Ensure access by immigrant communities to COVID-19 medical treatment and follow-up services.
• Ensure access to COVID-19 medical treatment in jails and prisons, including repealing the Medicaid Inmate Exclusion Policy.
• Strengthen and modernize the public health system.
• Provide grant funding for summer instruction to enable students to catch up to grade-level educational standards and take other steps to tackle the acute learning and achievement gaps and learning loss that Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children, and children from low-income households, overwhelmingly face.

The national strategy covers important areas and contains clear descriptions of many needed actions in its 200 pages. However, the goals are mostly formulated at a rather high policy level, meaning that they lack specific metrics and details to assess impact and accountability. The document also lacks many specific policy proposals that will be necessary to control spread of the disease and mitigate the mounting impacts. This does not mean that the administration will not proceed to take necessary action, only that they did not fully articulate all needed policy proposals in their early strategy. The NASW blueprint provides specific recommendations to fill some of the void for particulars left out in the administration’s plan. Starting with the particulars in the blueprint, social workers need to find ways to assess progress, even as we may be busy helping to implement the new directives.

You are now reading this six months in. Having reviewed the bold plans laid forth in the hopeful days of a new year, where do we stand?

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