



## Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

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# Gathering of Grand Challenges Network Groups: Dinner Remarks, September 14, 2016

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I thank you and our hosts, particularly Dean McKay, Michael Sherraden, and Rick Barth. On behalf of the 120,000-plus members of the National Association of Social Workers and staff, I thank you.

The meeting recognizes the cumulative contributions of so many in the room tonight. It is a testimony to the collective wisdom, intellectual reach, and commitments that guide our professional and advocacy efforts. These cut across the spectrum of social work practice areas from the micro to the macro arenas. This meeting tonight and over the next two days is a wonderful clarion call for the academic, professional, and allied-stakeholder partners to work in collaboration to identify solutions that will move the pendulum.

Tonight's monumental gathering brings together members of the academic ranks, the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, our professional associations, and so many of our practitioners and allies in the development, implementation, evaluation, and reinforcement of the added value of social work.

Specifically, our gathering recognizes the efforts of this distinguished body to move forward in bringing our collective wisdom and skills to a razor focus on complex social and human issues. These issues, of individual and collective concern in the domains of health, human and social capital and well-being, and economic and political resources, are fundamentally at the

core of so many of the complex problems facing our society today.

This meeting bridges worlds that often are disparate: the worlds of professional practice and the academy. We have a responsibility as professionals and intellectuals to use our resources to promote and advance solutions, assuring that problems are addressed—and not just to “tinker” with explorations around the edges of problems.

Yes, rigor and accountability are essential. However, our professional constituents working daily in the rank-and-file trenches cannot afford to have more weight placed on them: They do not need more esoteric information that cannot transform the practice, policy, and actions required to effect change NOW! Complex social problems that have deep historical roots will not be resolved overnight. This is not a magical process for us, and we cannot be naïve about the potential oppositions to be faced. After all, many of the problems we framed in these grand challenges have deep roots in the American fabric. If we are to be very honest, we have to acknowledge that, for some, resolution of these problems would result in dramatic losses of power and privilege—the forces and statuses that have been used to forge division as well as careers of academic, political, and economic elitism.

We must be focused on providing solutions that have meaning to our clients and within the

<sup>a</sup>This Perspective presents remarks delivered by Dean Darrell P. Wheeler, president, National Association of Social Workers, during [Social Innovation for America's Renewal](#), a September 2016 policy conference of the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative. The conference was organized by the Center for Social Development at Washington University in collaboration with the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare.

systems that serve them. At the same time, as we examine these challenges, we must ask ourselves two questions: What are the roles for social work, and what is the added value of having social work at the table? These propositions—adding value and return on investment—are vitally important in this era of heightened fiscal constraints and concerns, an era in which metric accountability reigns. An emphasis on these “nuts and bolts” matters translates as financial outcomes; to ignore them is to deny a reality facing our profession and our academic institutions. The questions about value and returns come from many quarters and often express the concerns of those who fund our services—concerns that sometimes differ from our own. We must be prepared to respond to questions about outcomes and fiscal relationships. Hopefully, we can say with definitive certainty that social work is essential in the given sphere of action, but if we cannot, we must bring the strength of our critical inquiries to the examination of why that is so. Ultimately, if we cannot answer the question of our professional added value or provide a solid rationale for our continued support, we have to be prepared to face the consequences. This is imperative because the market for our service share continues to grow increasingly competitive.

Tonight and throughout this meeting, we are being asked to challenge ourselves as we address these Grand Challenges and explore policy options. Thank you.

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