



Event Report

The social service workforce in and beyond the pandemic: A global conversation on adaptation, innovation and the fight for social justice



Partnerships **PLUS**



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Introduction

The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (the Alliance) and Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB) recently hosted a virtual symposium entitled, '[The social service workforce in and beyond the pandemic: A global conversation on adaptation, innovation and the fight for social justice.](#)' Held on 15 September 2021, over 260 individuals joined via Zoom from countries across the world.

Attendees heard speakers share experiences and lessons learned by the social service workforce as they continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Presentations focused on social service workforce practice in and beyond the pandemic; social service workforce education and training in and beyond the pandemic; and the role of the social service workforce in advancing social justice. Each presentation was followed by breakout room sessions, during which participants could connect directly to discuss their personal experiences and collaboratively explore questions posed by the speakers. Attendees used the online platform Slido to post questions throughout the event, as well as share reflections from their discussions.

The symposium was moderated by Dr. Kathryn Wehrmann (Chair of the Steering Committee for the Alliance), who offered opening and closing remarks, as well as facilitated brief discussions with the speakers after the breakout sessions. The event also included the launch of the Alliance's '[State of the Social Service Workforce Report 2020: Responding, Adapting and Innovating During COVID-19, and Beyond.](#)' and Alliance Director, Hugh Salmon, gave a presentation sharing insights from the report about challenges faced by social service organizations and workers since the beginning of the pandemic, and how they have adapted and innovated in response to such challenges.

All event recordings and presentations can be found on the [Alliance's website](#).

About the host organizations

[The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance](#) works to promote and strengthen the social service workforce to provide services when and where they are most needed, alleviate poverty, challenge and reduce discrimination, promote social justice and human rights, and prevent and respond to violence and family separation. To achieve this, we work to build and channel the political will, actions, resources and structures necessary for a social service workforce that is knowledgeable, capable, critically reflective, resilient and committed.

[Children and Families Across Borders](#) is the only UK charity with an international children's social work team and the only UK member of the International Social Service network. We identify and protect the most vulnerable children who have been separated from their families in complex and often dangerous situations due to conflict, trafficking, migration, family breakdown or asylum-related issues.

Event agenda

Time (UTC)	Session	Presenter/Facilitator
1:00 – 1:15pm	Welcome	Dr. Kathryn Wehrmann
1:15 – 1:35pm	State of Social Service Workforce Report 2020 Overview and lessons learned	Hugh Salmon
Session 1: Social service workforce practice in and beyond the pandemic		
1:35 – 2:20pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Presentation (10 minutes)▪ Breakout room discussion (25 min)▪ Wrap-up (10 min)	Dr. Heather Modlin
Session 2: Social service workforce education and training in and beyond the pandemic		
2:20 – 3:05pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Presentation (10 minutes)▪ Breakout room discussion (25 min)▪ Wrap-up (10 min)	Dr. Prospera Tadam
3:05 – 3:15pm	Break	
Session 3: Role of social service workforce in advancing social justice		
3:15 – 4:00pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Presentation (10 minutes)▪ Breakout room discussion (25 min)▪ Wrap-up (10 min)	Dr. Vishanthie Sewpaul
4:00 – 4:05pm	Closing remarks	Dr. Kathryn Wehrmann

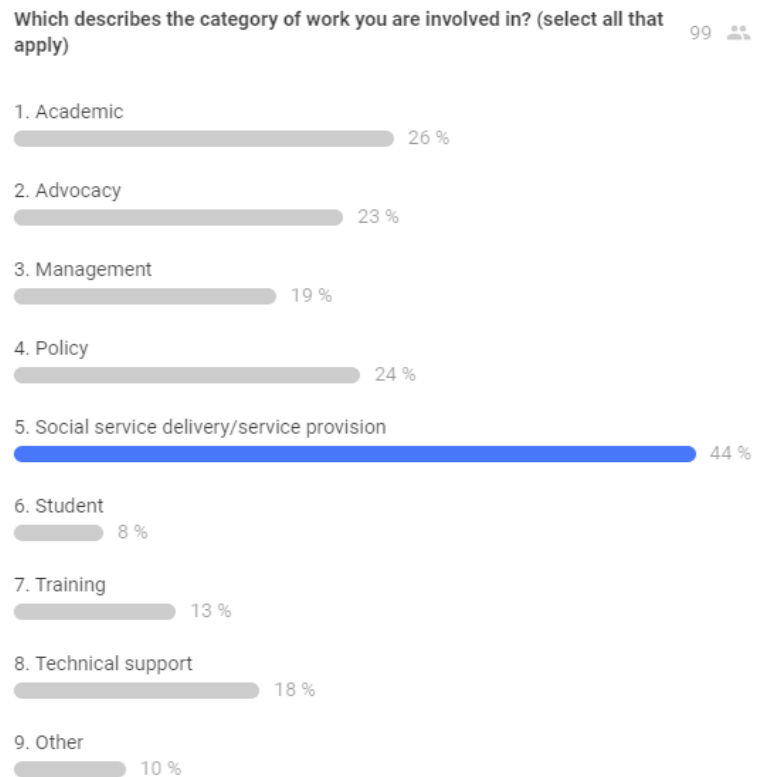
Global Conference Welcome

Dr. Kathryn Wehrmann, *Chair of the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance Steering Committee, U.S. National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Board President (2017-2020), Emeritus Associate Professor of Social Work at Illinois State University*

Prior to starting, participants were invited to participate in a poll via the Slido platform. The poll asked participants which category of work they are involved in. Of those who participated, 44% were in social service delivery/service provision, followed by academia (26%), policy (24%) and advocacy (23%).

Dr. Kathryn Wehrmann opened the symposium by thanking attendees for joining. She introduced the two host organizations, CFAB and the Alliance, and then outlined that the conversation would explore the impact of the pandemic on practice, education, and training for the social service workforce, looking at risks and challenges, as well as innovations and adaptations that may continue to be part of the workforce's collective future. In addition, she noted that the event would consider the ways that the social service workforce has and can overcome wide-ranging social injustices, which have been made more obvious to the world throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Poll from event shows the category of work attendees are involved in



Presentation on the State of the Social Service Workforce Report 2020

Hugh Salmon, *Director of the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance*

Dr. Wehrmann welcomed the first presenter: Hugh Salmon, Director of the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance. Dr. Wehrmann invited attendees to submit any questions they may have throughout his presentation via Slido.

Hugh Salmon welcomed attendees and offered an introduction to the Alliance's 'State of the Social Service Workforce Report 2020: Responding, adapting, and innovating during COVID-19, and beyond,' which looks at the challenges that social service workers and organizations have faced since the beginning of the pandemic, the ways they have innovated and adapted in response to such challenges, the lasting impact of the pandemic and opportunities to further raise awareness of the workforce.

Based on the report, Hugh Salmon described a number of key challenges faced by the social service workforce due to COVID-19, including increased demands on workers, as well as staffing shortages that have required rapid recruitment or increased reliance on community volunteers, often without adequate training or supervision. Hugh also spoke about the workforce's shift to remote service provision without prior experience or training (sometimes amidst limited access to electricity, internet, and devices), as well as, in certain places, a lack of immediate recognition by the government of the workforce as essential. In response, the workforce has found innovative ways to offer continuous, effective service provision and support client and worker well-being, while also advocating for the workforce. Hugh noted that the report finds that it will be critical to continue to address training, capacity building, resource and coordination needs, as well as to lobby for greater recognition amongst leaders, to ensure the workforce is ready for future emergency scenarios.

Hugh Salmon then responded to a few questions provided by attendees via Slido. One asked, "did any of these findings lead agencies to change procedures or policies that could remain in effect for better service or more equitable service post-pandemic?" Although he was not able to give a specific example, Hugh mentioned that many organizations have indeed had to revisit their policies and guidance, and suggested that people are now more aware that when shifting to technology-based service provision, access has to be equitable. He also noted that in crises there are typically immediate changes that occur in practice which are not immediately reflected in policies and regulation, but usually are in due course.

Another attendee asked about how to secure commitment from governments for the protection of the social service workforce in these challenging times. Hugh Salmon responded that it is critical for the workforce to organize and continue to advocate. He noted that this includes professional associations, but also informal coalitions, and partnerships with allied sectors, donors and partners.

Dr. Wehrmann concluded by thanking Hugh Salmon and the attendees for their participation, as well as encouraging them to continue to respond to one another via Slido.

Session 1: Social Service Workforce Practice In and Beyond the Pandemic

Dr. Heather Modlin, *CEO with Amal Youth and Family Centre,*
Steering Committee Member for the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance

Dr. Wehrmann moved the conversation into Session 1 with an introduction of Dr. Heather Modlin, who currently serves as CEO with Amal Youth and Family Centre, a non-profit organization providing a range of innovative, culturally diverse services to individuals, families and communities. Dr. Modlin is also a member of the Steering Committee for the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance.

Dr. Modlin began by outlining challenges and opportunities that have emerged regarding the social service workforce in practice during the pandemic. Dr. Modlin noted that, when so much of the world started operating from home, the social service workforce continued to go into work, in a time of real risk and anxiety. Many workers became trapped in a damaging cycle of “go to work – go home – go to work,” without outlets to de-stress and engage in positive coping activities.

In many situations, essential social service workers also lost vital support staff, as others began working from home or were personally dealing with the impact of the pandemic. At the same time, there were new demands on workers’ time, leading to increased strain on those who were at work. In addition, Dr. Modlin pointed out the unique experience of social service workers, who have been helping clients through traumatic times while simultaneously experiencing that same trauma themselves.

“When much of the world started working from home, the social service workforce went into work, en masse, not unlike what we tend to do in ‘normal’ circumstances – we move towards the danger, instead of moving away from it.”
-Dr. Modlin

Dr. Modlin continued by highlighting that there have also been many positive adaptations throughout the pandemic. For one, the crisis has offered a shared experience, which has allowed for innovative use of creative engagement activities, particular with youth, and new forms of relationships between clients and workers. She also said that she had encountered stories from many countries where a significant percentage of youth in care did better than expected during the pandemic, and, in some situations, better than they were doing prior to COVID-19; which is likely due to having a shared experience and increased consistency in staff presence that emerged out of staffing challenges. She also mentioned that there have been opportunities for increased connection, both for clients and workers as they have found new means of engagement, but also on a global scale through virtual conferences such as this symposium.

Dr. Modlin then presented three questions for attendees to discuss in their breakout rooms:

1. What are the biggest risks and challenges you have experienced in your work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How have you and your organization dealt with these challenges and adapted your practice during COVID-19?

3. What opportunities for innovative practice in the social service workforce have emerged from the pandemic?

Participants were then placed into randomly assigned breakout rooms for discussion. Many varied and engaging discussions took place in the breakout rooms. Dr. Modlin and Dr. Wehrmann moved throughout the breakout rooms to listen in on the conversations and then discussed their findings, from both the rooms and the Slido platform, during a wrap-up session.

Dr. Modlin noted interesting examples mentioned in the groups of additional challenges faced by workers, including the need to wear a mask, or mask and face shield to work each day, which has created difficulties when engaging with and showing empathy for clients. She also pointed out challenges in certain countries regarding technological access; as an example, an attendee from South Africa shared via Slido that they have seen the digital divide highlighted throughout the pandemic, as students and community members have struggled without equal access to the internet or devices. A participant from Chile in the Spanish speaking group spoke of widening inequality resulting from government schools remaining closed much longer than private schools during the pandemic. Others in the same group spoke of a second pandemic which was the impact on mental health, and the third which was the increase in family violence. Dr. Wehrmann added the idea of intersectionality that emerged in several of the breakout rooms, as the pandemic has showed us that some populations are much more adversely affected when healthcare needs are high, and they are dealing with different compounding challenges.

Both Dr. Modlin and Dr. Wehrmann noted the recurring theme of resilience. Many attendees shared examples of creative and innovative adaptations that have been used and, because of their effectiveness, may continue to be used. Though many attendees expressed strain created by increased demands, they also highlighted how the social service workforce has continued to show up and get the work done.

Other comments that emerged from the Slido forum included:

“Social Workers in our country were one of the 1st responders to those who are in need during the pandemic. When the government started the roll out of the social amelioration program, the social workers stayed in the field doing validations. But, suddenly, we are not considered as essential workers.”

“Students suddenly had to work to keep financial afloat - influencing their studies as well. Our partners in the communities relied on students but during hard lockdown students could not be in the communities.”

“In Colombia, indigenous, non-Spanish speaking children were also especially disadvantaged, and were sometimes put into informal groups for substitute schooling that did not meet their cultural needs.”

“PPE presented several problems - not only wearing it for long periods, but also creating barriers affecting non-verbal communication and difficulties for those with hearing impairments.”

Session 2: Social Service Education and Training In and Beyond the Pandemic

Dr. Prospera Tedam, *Department of Social Wellbeing at United Arab Emirates University*

Dr. Wehrmann introduced Dr. Prospera Tedam, Professor at United Arab Emirates University, who presented Session 2, which looked at the impact of the pandemic on educators and learners.

Dr. Tedam began by exploring challenges that have arisen with on-campus/onsite learning, which have included, for some students, a lack of adequate quiet or free space to study from home. In addition, many students have been simultaneously trying to navigate their own studies, while also having to homeschool their children. Students also grappled with poverty, through loss of other sources of income, such as part-time work. Digital poverty has also affected many students, who have had to get creative about how to participate in virtual classes, including accessing the internet through hotspots on their phones. Finally, the pandemic has led to feelings of isolation for many students, especially those from minority groups, as they have struggled with the absence of traditional peer group support systems.

Dr. Tedam went on to discuss the impact of the pandemic on practice learning/field education. Many students have felt nervous navigating issues of confidentiality when providing client services from home. In addition, many have experienced heightened inequality resulting from barriers accessing remote field learning opportunities. For students who have been able to continue with field learning remotely, there have been concerns about the quality and type of supervision being provided. The delay in securing placements has left many students to decide if they should simply “make do” with what field education opportunities have been available to them or pause their studies until placements return to “normal.”

Looking beyond the pandemic, Dr. Tedam noted that many have come to appreciate the shared learning opportunities that have come from increased connectivity around the world (webinars, online events, etc.). In addition, many have adapted to create new types of peer and collegiate support, such as coffee meetings held over Zoom. In addition, learners and educators alike have discovered new skills, interests and self-care strategies. Finally, because the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the inequalities that exist between populations, it has brought about an increased awareness of the impact on learning caused by such inequalities.

Dr. Tedam then introduced three questions for participants to discuss in their breakout rooms:

1. In what ways do you think online/virtual placements/field education will impact qualified practice?
2. From an employer perspective, what additional training (if any) would you offer to new social service practitioners who join your organization during the pandemic?
3. How do you think the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities for various groups in social work/social services education and training?

After returning to the main room, Dr. Tedam shared several things she heard across breakout conversations. One was concern about the preparedness of social work students to enter the workforce, especially for students whose entire field learning experiences have been online. She also noted that while many participants expressed that online and hybrid learning can be used effectively, there also seems to be a shared feeling that “nothing beats face-to-face.”

*“There is significant concern about social workers who are coming out into practice. And the real question is, do those practitioners feel ready, able and prepared... not necessarily do **we** think they’re prepared – do **they** think they’re prepared.”*
-Dr. Tedam

She then mentioned the need for better collaboration and connectivity between service providers and universities, with more robust arrangements so that neither students nor future employers feel they are short-changed by remote learning scenarios. Finally, she reflected that there is a real need to determine, should comparable situations arise in the future, who should deal with increased costs for things like home internet and extended graduation timelines – and noted that ultimately, it should not be the students.

Other comments that emerged from the Slido forum included:

“I’m concerned for upcoming social workers and if they will feel as prepared after a 2-year graduate program in social work (length of program in US) if they never really had field experience... I’m wondering how schools are actually managing this to prepare the new cohorts of social workers?”

“Ms. Tedam is spot on when she talks about students being anxious re the quality of their training, especially when they go back to working in ‘normal’/physical set up”

“I fear that for some, the inability to secure social work education placements has had major financial repercussions – I heard from a fellow student that having to extend their studies has meant they have to pay additional semesters’ tuition.”

“The virtual education methods in Colombia have not been effective, they do not recognize the social, cultural and economic context of girls, boys, adolescents and young people, thus increasing the levels of school dropout.”

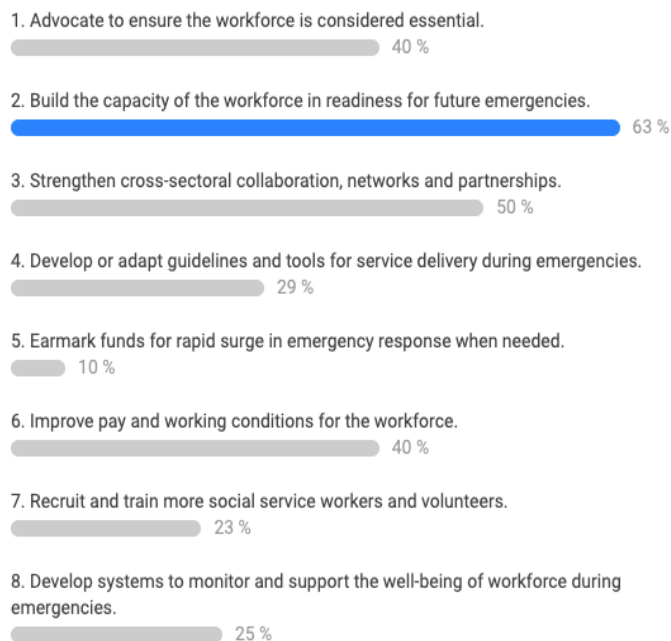
“There was discussion about how the pandemic provided opportunities to use and develop the digital skills of social work students as well as clients/ service users.”

Session 3: Role of Social Service Workforce in Advancing Social Justice

Dr. Vishanthie Sewpaul, *Emeritus Professor at the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa; Adjunct Professor at the University of Stavanger, Norway*

After a short break, but before resuming the presentations, Dr. Wehrmann shared the results of another participant poll conducted via Slido, which asked, “so that the workforce is better able to respond to future pandemics and global crises, which of the following actions are most important?”

Poll from event shows which actions participants consider most important in preparing for future pandemics and global crises



Dr. Wehrmann then moved into the final session by introducing Dr. Vishanthie Sewpaul, Emeritus Professor at the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, who is also a member of the Steering Committee for the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance.

Dr. Sewpaul’s presentation was on the role of the social service workforce in advancing social justice. She began by noting the many factors that currently divide the world: narrow nationalism, religious extremism, xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, climate change and neoliberal racialized capitalism. These do not exist in isolation, however, and seep into the lives of communities, families and individuals. Social service workers therefore play a powerful role in picking up the pieces of structural

injustices, but this is not enough, especially as we face the continued and future impacts of COVID-19 and the climate crisis.

She went on to reflect that the micro–macro divide we often use when looking at social work is in fact false. Many policymakers and service providers tend to adopt individualized, pathology-based approaches to deep structural injustices. Instead, we must transform “personal” problems into public issues. Social justice initiatives must be directed at heightening awareness of external sources of oppression and/or privileges to allow people themselves to confront structural sources of poverty, inequality,

“Friends, these huge problems of the world are not going to go away perhaps for generations, centuries to come. So what is important is that people have a sense of hope, and they can only have that sense of hope by being involved themselves.”
-Dr. Sewpaul

marginalization, oppression, violence and exclusion.

Dr. Sewpaul then presented questions for discussion in breakout rooms:

1. What are the key drivers of social injustices?
2. How do these social injustices manifest in the communities that you work in?
3. How has COVID-19 exacerbated these injustices?
4. How have social service workers responded/how can they respond to social injustices?

In her reflections, Dr. Sewpaul noted that many breakout rooms discussed the importance of addressing the root causes of injustices. In addition, the theme of empowerment and participation came up in conversations, including the importance of group work and community work. In the Spanish speaking group, participants from Guatemala and Colombia spoke of a range of ways in which already disadvantaged and marginalized groups, include those of indigenous or African origin, suffered further challenges and rights violations during the pandemic, including unequal access to health supplies and vaccines, and a re-emergence of attacks by armed groups and criminal gangs, exacerbated by weak responses by governments, impunity for crimes and corruption. It was also mentioned that increasing marginalization and violence, combined with lack of access to justice, is resulting in a loss of hope, which then acts as a driver for risky migration, as seen in the increasing numbers migrating north from and through Latin America to the US. However, on a more positive note, in terms of how the social service workforce has responded, they gave accounts of how advocacy has been transformed, with a wider range of civil society groups and grassroots social activists forming new alliances for advocacy, including direct testimony from children and the most marginalized.

Dr. Sewpaul also brought up the need to be aware of and develop a resistance politics against the narrow, neoliberal “what works” agenda, which has only been reinforced by the necessities that have arisen out of COVID-19. As an example, she returns to tertiary institutions: driven by institutional pressures for profits, world rankings, and ratings, schools might be compelled to accept 2,000+ students into a course instead of capping admission, focusing on commodification over quality of student experience.

To conclude the session, Dr. Wehrmann posed to Dr. Sewpaul how she would articulate a call to action for members of the social service workforce. Dr. Sewpaul responded that she would emphasize the need to politicize ourselves and heighten our own awareness about the sources of structural injustices in the lives of those we work with on the ground. Once we do, we can move far beyond a focus on “diagnosing, fixing and treating people” to address structural injustices as well.

Other comments that emerged from the Slido forum included:

“COVID-19 is a real opportunity to eliminate neo-liberalism and all forms of inequality, and to build a society of true social and economic wellbeing.”

“Social work intervention methods, especially group work and community development can play important role in starting social justice initiatives”

“Understanding our own biases could be an important first step to a deeper understanding of entrenched injustices, discrimination at the societal level. How much does social work education/professional development of social service practitioners focus on helping identify our own biases, beliefs?”

“When talking about social justice during and after COVID, we need to remember places with a prolonged conflict like Afghanistan, Yemen”

“Individuals create structures and systems that perpetuate discrimination and injustice that cause poverty, etc... social workers work with people, but typically those impacted by that injustice. how can we work more with those individuals causing the injustice?”

Closing Remarks

Dr. Kathryn Wehrmann

To conclude the symposium, Dr. Wehrmann offered her thanks to all participants for joining and expressed her hope that this would truly be an ongoing conversation. She highlighted major themes from throughout the event, including the immense resilience, creativity, and commitment of the social service workforce during the pandemic. She expressed appreciation for the clear call to action regarding social justice and the need to fight for it, beginning by looking at ourselves and how we can do better.