

# Ethical Dilemmas in Macro Social Work Practice

## Dilemma #1

You are an organizer working with a coalition of local neighborhood groups. You have had great difficulty getting the groups to overcome their turf battles and other parochial interests in order to come together towards the unifying goals of neighborhood improvement, crime reduction, and youth engagement. Attendance at meetings has been low, and leaders have spent more time arguing with each other than working together. You are surprised and elated, then, to arrive at one coalition meeting to find more than 80 people gathered and enthusiastic to present a new work plan for the coalition. Apparently, leaders from several of the organizations have concluded that recent immigrants in the neighborhoods are to blame for the conditions of housing deterioration and rising crime. They want to work together to form a 'neighborhood watch'-style organization that would investigate immigrants' legal statuses and turn undocumented immigrants over to federal authorities. They also want to stop publishing any neighborhood documents in multiple languages, as 'that only encourages them.' There appears to be near unanimity about this problem and the proposed solution—the neighborhood leaders have gone through the coalition's established channels to win support from the grassroots supporters. As the organizer, you are very concerned, though, as this idea and these positions are contrary to your values and your emphasis on the well-being of all area residents. How should you respond at this meeting? What should you do after the meeting? With whom do you need to speak? What could you have done differently to try to prevent this situation? What community practice values/principles should guide your actions?

## Dilemma #2

You are a social work administrator who runs a small nonprofit organization serving adults and adolescents experiencing homelessness. In addition to your tasks overseeing case managers and the operations of your residential shelter, you have started to facilitate a social action group with some of the shelter's residents who are interested in coming together to advocate for better treatment by the city, particularly from the police department. You have helped the participants to organize to present testimony at City Council meetings, write letters to their commissioners, and document some of the abuses at the hands of the police, which resulted in a series of media reports about how homeless individuals' rights are violated by the City. At last night's meeting, the participants concurred that the most important concrete goal for their work is the funding and establishment of a day shelter where they can rest, study, eat, and recreate without harassment from the police (your shelter is only open at night). They are emboldened by the attention they have received and vow to keep attending City Council meetings and engaging in other strategies to 'keep the pressure up' until they can win the several hundred thousand dollars per year that it will take to fund the day shelter. This morning, you receive a phone call from the Mayor. He knows that you have been working with the homeless individuals, and he expresses his upset about the news articles and all of the negative attention. He promises that he will 'do anything' to make the situation quiet down, even if it means spending money. He says, though, that if the group keeps coming to 'disrupt' City Council meetings, he will be forced to take a tough public stance, and there will be a standoff. Should you tell him about the demand for a day shelter? Should you use this opportunity to ask for what the group wants? Should you share with the group what the Mayor promised? What considerations should you weigh in deciding what to do next? What comprises the ethical dilemma here?

### **Dilemma #3**

The community coalition for which you serve as lobbyist has been engaged in a legislative fight for additional funding for child abuse prevention programs. The biggest opponent is the Speaker of the House in the state legislature—the state controls the budget for this type of program, and he has refused to even allow the House to consider any bills increasing the spending for this work. You have tried media pressure, individual lobbying of House members, intervention with the Executive Branch, and even appeals to the Speaker’s donors, but nothing has budged him at all. The Legislature is due to recess in 2 weeks, and at your coalition meeting today, the mood was bleak. No one is optimistic that the Speaker will relent, and no one can find a way around him to get the money needed to keep the existing programs in operation and to expand in order to meet needs in the northwest corner of the state (where there are no programs) and for ethnic and language minorities (who are currently severely underserved). While you are meeting with an influential state senator about a different matter, she confides that she has confidential information that the Speaker was confirmed for a child abuse allegation a few years ago, and that that experience explains his hostility to your coalition and its goals. She suggests that ‘going public’ with this information would, at the least, dislodge the Speaker’s opposition and potentially even force him to resign. You know that it would be relatively easy to have one of your coalition members who works in child welfare corroborate the senator’s allegation, and you don’t doubt her prediction about the impact of publicizing it, if it indeed is true. You can’t see any other way to win the funding that you know will benefit hundreds, if not thousands, of children and their families. What should you do? What are the implications of responding positively to the senator’s suggestions? Of responding negatively? What should you consider in deciding whether to act on this information? Should you consult with anyone? With whom?

### **Dilemma #4**

You are the Executive Director of a nonprofit organization that provides after-school programming for adolescent girls. The agency began as part of the Catholic Church but is now an independent 501(c)3 organization. You supervise staff who provide academic enrichment, life skills training, career preparation, and recreational opportunities to more than 400 mostly low-income teens annually. Your staff has recently become concerned about rising rates of teenage sexual activity among your participants—several girls have become pregnant, and many more talk openly about unsafe sexual practices. A group of girls who are clients at the organization have approached staff about starting a sex education program, as they have little available sex education that is culturally appropriate. Working with the group, two of your counselors develop a plan to create a new coalition committed to comprehensive sex education and teen pregnancy prevention. They have outlined several goals, including increased funding for such programs and additional resources for provision of contraceptives in this community, which faces a shortage of health care providers. They have also identified several potential members, including a local health clinic, a church, the youth representatives of your programs, and two local high schools. After discussing their strategy and ensuring that they can take on coalition-building tasks in addition to their regular duties, you encourage them to proceed. The following week, you receive an irate call from your Board Chair, who has served on the Board since the organization’s founding and is enraged at a ‘rumor’ that you have given your blessing to the organization’s participation in a coalition to ‘hand out condoms to our girls.’ He vows that, if you do not stop your staff from engaging in such activity, he will call for your dismissal. How should you respond? What competing obligations do you face as an employee and a supervisor? What values should guide your decisions? How could you have anticipated and possibly avoided this situation? What guidance does the NASW Code of Ethics give?