



## Social Work Policy Practice in a National Crisis: How Legitimate Is It?

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### Abstract

Social workers' involvement in policy change processes sometimes raises a question regarding the legitimacy of promoting the issue that requires change during a national crisis or disaster. Despite the grave sorrow caused by extreme crises, they call the issue to attention, offer an opportunity for action. The article presents two examples for successful activities taken in Israel to change policies in a crisis, and recommendations for the sensitivity required on the professional, ethical and moral levels.

**Keywords:** Policy Change, Social Workers, Policymakers, Policy Window, Crisis

### Introduction

One of the leading theories on promoting policy change and legislation is Kingdon's [1] policy streams approach. This approach describes how a "policy window" opens to promote the policy change when three streams intersect: the problem, policy, and political streams. The theory is designed to take advantage of extreme political situations or events to raise the issue for discussion and pressure decision makers to promote the change.

In times of crisis, the populations treated by social workers are more vulnerable [2], but at the same time they may be better able to present their stories and promote public relations in the media and among policymakers [3]. The evident social need affects the public agenda and creates a "policy window" [1]. This claim is illustrated below through two examples from Israel.

### Success Stories

The first example is the 2020 struggle of the Israel Union of Social Workers for the pay and conditions of social workers [4]. COVID-19 dramatically increased distress and the burden borne by the social workers was heavy and immediate [5, 6]. Nevertheless, some social workers were let go or furloughed [7, 8]. The Union saw the crisis as an opportunity to pressure the government, since social workers were held in particularly high public esteem at that time. Some workers felt uneasy with "exploiting the crisis", and asked whether this was the right time to talk about salaries. Nevertheless, the Union pushed the struggle and following an intense campaign, made significant achievements for its members [9].

The second example has to do with the 1950 Families of Casualties (Compensation and Rehabilitation) Law. According to the law, a married woman who has lost her husband in a war is entitled to financial and mental support by the state, with no time limit. The original law did not include spouses who were engaged and avoided cohabiting for religious reasons. In 2017 an attempt was made to solve this problem, which failed due to the small number of cases. After the outbreak of the recent Israel-Hamas war in 2023, the number of cases increased dramatically, forming a policy opportunity. The struggle succeeded and as of 2024, the law applies to fiancées as well, albeit for a period of five years [10].

### Policy Change in a Crisis: Professional and Realistic Viewpoints

In both cases, the crisis event was a policy window [1]. I believe that for social workers to be able to promote social change and affect legislation, they must learn how to operate in crises as well, and take advantage of the opportunities they offer. It is important to act professionally and systematically over the long term. This means, among other things, collecting data, analyzing the problem, assessing alternatives and presenting a policy paper about the new change [11, 12]. Nevertheless, it is also important to be realistic: to read the political field, and to be well-prepared to raise the issue for public discussion and media exposure when a "focusing event" occurs [1]. Such event produce opportunities for change because of their intensity, the pain they involved, and the legitimacy they provide. The professional and realistic viewpoints are not necessarily contradictory, but must be complementary. The change that needs to occur is mainly in the social workers' perception of the action attempting to leverage the crisis as legitimate.

### Policy Change in a Crisis: Sensitivity to Professional, Ethical, and Moral Issues

While I support activities for policy change at a time of national crisis or disaster, it is important to emphasize that such activities require attention to professional, ethical, and moral issues. Acting at a time of crisis or disaster usually involves presenting the stories of affected individuals in the media. In this situation, social workers must be extremely sensitive: prepare the victim or survivor before the publication, and explain the possible results of media exposure, including unsympathetic or offensive responses. It is important not to

push individuals to reveal their stories when they are unprepared – the result is an emotional upheaval so that the exposure could cause even greater damage. The quick response required so as not to “miss the moment” can result in precipitous action without sufficient reliance on reliable information and without consultation with the victims/survivors or other stakeholders. Therefore, it is essential to strike the balance between a rapid response and appropriate preparations.

My experience in teaching policy practice has taught me that social workers usually feel uneasy with “exploiting” a crisis or disaster to promote a new policy or legislation, and that some of them even consider such a course of action illegitimate. Together with the requisite care, I consider such action important, and believe it can enhance social workers’ ability to change policies and promote social justice.

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