Summary of a Meeting held on June 14, 2013 about How SSW can best Respond when there are Disasters and/or Violent Incidents in Communities where Students are in Field Placements

In January of this year, the School for Social Work convened a meeting to reflect on how it can respond to students in the field when there are disasters most effectively. A range of ideas and plans came out of this meeting with a focus on disaster preparedness, using multiple pathways to communicate with students when there are disasters and how to help students deepen their skills of self-care and safety. The ideas from that meeting continue to be worked on and implemented throughout the SSW system.

This summer, an open meeting was convened with students to continue this conversation. In Attendance were Six students who were in communities that directly experienced disasters and/or severe violence or were deeply affected by disasters in other communities, Carolyn du Bois, Katelin Lewis-Kuhlin from the Field Office, Professor Peggy O'Neil, Associate Dean Irene Rodriguez Martin, and Associate Dean Joshua Miller

We went over what students had experienced during the year and the kind of reactions they had carried at the time and have been experiencing since. Examples of situations included the Oklahoma tornadoes, the Boston Marathon Bombing and Hurricane Sandy. Students talked about feelings of helplessness and conflict over self-care vs. the demands of their placements. Direct communication from the Field Office was very helpful as were telephone calls made by FFAs after major disasters. Carolyn du Bois encouraged students to talk with FFAs when they were having strong reactions or difficulties focusing on their placements. Students also appreciated when agencies or FFAs were available to help them to think about how they could attend to their own safety in situations where they felt that this was compromised.

What was reinforced is that there needs to be multiple pathways to reach students – e.g. texting, facebook, as well as more traditional routes like email and phone calls – and that in turn students can be helpful by reaching out to FFAs and the Field Office if they are aware of local community situations, which the Field Office may not know about. Having a more active website with a searchable engine that students could access for information and resources would also be helpful; perhaps a Field Office Moodle site for all students and FFAs as well.
The Field Office has already been planning to make training about physical safety a priority (having scheduled training for students in this area on August 4 and 5) as well as disaster preparedness and response, which was well received by this group. It was also recommended that there be more of an emphasis on safety in practice classes. The self-care page of the SSW website is being expanded but many students are unaware of it – so more cross-referencing with the Field site would be helpful. We also discussed how students may have ongoing or recurring reactions and that SSW has a number of ways of supporting students, (including FFAs, referrals to therapists, integrative field seminars) that students are encouraged to access.

Respectfully Submitted,

Joshua Miller