

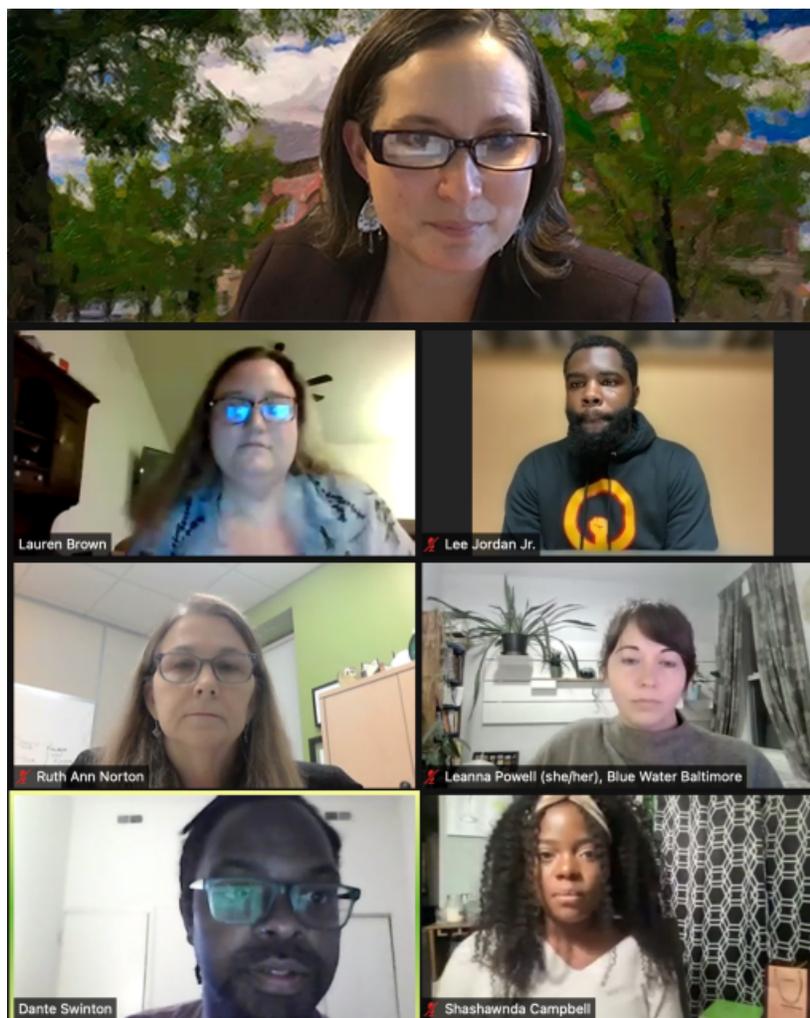


UMB News

Social Workers Who Seek Environmental Justice

December 9, 2021 | By [Charles Schelle](#)

Social workers at their core are devoted to social justice. Environmental justice as an extension within the social work field is one way to apply that devotion to help people confronted by climate change and pollution.



From top, left to right, Lisa Reyes Mason, Lauren Brown, Lee Jordan, Ruth Ann Norton, Leanna Powell, Dante Swinton, and Shashawnda Campbell

"Vulnerable populations, such as low-income communities, individuals with disabilities, and certain racial and ethnic minorities, are disproportionately exposed to unsafe living and working conditions, and are more negatively impacted by our changing environment," said **Nicole Mattocks, PhD, MSQW**, research assistant professor at the [University of Maryland School of Social Work \(UMSSW\)](#), in an interview. "These are issues of environmental injustice in which social workers could and should get involved."

"Social workers are uniquely positioned to advance environmental justice because we possess valuable direct practice skills and are experts in building relationships and connections across groups – we know how to work collaboratively with individuals and communities, and we approach these relationships with respect, humility and attention to social injustices," Mattocks added.

The UMSSW [Daniel Thursz Social Justice Lecture](#) on Tuesday, Dec. 7, assembled a panel of Baltimore area nonprofits to discuss their role in assisting people who are impacted by environmental quality issues and how social workers can carve out a role.

([Watch a recording of the event here](#) 🔄)

Panelists included:

- Leanna Powell from Blue Water Baltimore
- Dante Swinton from Clean Air Baltimore
- Lee Jordan from Black Yield Institute
- Ruth Ann Norton from Green & Healthy Homes Initiative
- Shashawnda Campbell from South Baltimore Community Land Trust

Social workers in the role of an advocate or a community organizer, among others, can meet people facing a myriad of environmental issues. It could be sewage back-ups caused from increased flooding and inadequate infrastructure, or lead paint abatement, fracking in Western Maryland, health issues from air pollution created by an incinerator, among others.

In her guest lecture, Lisa Reyes Mason, PhD, MSW, associate professor at the University of Denver School of Social Work, presented the evolution of social workers involved with policy, advocacy and community organizing with environmental issues, even issues that may not be initially associated with climate change.

"In Denver, where I am now, and in so many other cities, racist redlining policies codified 100 years ago are clearly connected to climate injustice today," Reyes Mason said. "Redlined neighborhoods have experienced intentional disinvestment, and now they tend to have less green space and tree cover, they tend to be hot spots of urban heat islands or being higher risk flood zones than non-redlined areas."

That study could easily replace Denver with Baltimore. The organizations that appeared at the lecture also intersect the areas of environmental and racial justice in Baltimore, where environmental issues are disproportionately affecting Black residents.

This is where social workers can do a lot of good with expertise in conflict resolution, sincerely listening to people's needs and working on solutions.

Green & Healthy Homes Initiative focuses on the intersection of degradation of housing stock and lead poisoning in children by advocating for lead-free and lead-safe neighborhoods along with lower asthma injuries and increased energy efficiency. The organization approaches it from a moral standpoint, addressing racial disparities, said the initiative's President and Chief Executive Officer Ruth Ann Norton.

"In our organization, we also provide legal representation and case management. At the core of the education and achievement of the advocacy goals is our social work practice," Norton said.

The nonprofit has numerous opportunities for social workers including positions for organizing and legislative policy on climate, energy and equity and healthy housing.

Lauren Brown is enrolled in a dual degree partnership program between University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) and Johns Hopkins University (JHU) where she is earning both her Master of Social Work from UMSSW and a Master of Public Health at JHU. It's allowing her to fulfill her planned career path being involved in environmental justice and sustainability.

"I'm really excited to see more educational programs for social workers in environmental fields," Brown said.

She is completing her JHU practicum at Green and Healthy Homes Initiative where she interviews industry leaders about workforce development barriers and interviews residents who lived with lead paint and explores how they were helped by the organization.

At Blue Water Baltimore, the organization has a particular focus now on helping Baltimore residents with reporting sewage overflow and back-ups and getting access to clean-up programs in addition to other social justice environmental research.

"We welcome proposals from people interested working with us and we do paid internships," said Leanna Powell, director of development and communications for Blue Water Baltimore.

UMSSW students have previously worked with Blue Water Baltimore promoting rain gardens, transforming impervious surfaces, and assisting with environmental education.

At Black Yield Institute, where another MSW student is completing a practicum, social workers help build infrastructure for community gardens to help eliminate food deserts.

In recent years, examples of UMSSW students doing environmental justice work include with the Maryland Environmental Health Network on statewide environmental policy concerning fracking; United Workers at the Filbert Street Community Garden in Curtis Bay; and Baltimore Office of Sustainability Environmental Youth Leadership Program to help high school students to organize around environmental causes.

Remembering Hadassah Thursz

Corey Shdaimah, LL.M., Ph.D., Daniel Thursz Distinguished Professor of Social Justice, also took a moment at the beginning of the program to share the passing of Hadassah Thursz, wife of the late [Daniel Thursz](#). The program and endowed chair is named after the former SSW dean.

Hadassah Thurz passed away Friday, Nov. 26, at the age of 91.

"Hadassah Thursz was the beloved wife of Daniel Thursz, and along with other family and friends of Dean Thursz, often came to our bi-annual lectures," Shdaimah said. "She was instrumental in creating this social justice lecture series. We offer our condolences to the Thursz family, and we hope that this lecture series serves as a testament to Hadassah Thursz's legacy. May her memory be a blessing."

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