The UConn School of Social Work stands at the forefront of the fields of international social work and human rights. Faculty members work on a diverse range of research topics, including torture and human rights abuses, food insecurity, global policy, the social welfare state in Europe, and remittances and microcredit.

Dr. Lynne Healy, Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor, founded the School of Social Work’s Center for International Social Work Studies in 1992. Considered a leader in the field, Dr. Healy received the 2014 Katherine A. Kendall Award from the International Association of Schools of Social Work; the award is named for a pioneer in international social work. UConn’s Center for International Social Work Studies, now led by Dr. Rebecca Thomas, received the Council on Social Work Education’s Partners in Advancing International Education (PIE) Award in 2014.

Dr. Healy and many of her School of Social Work colleagues approach their work from a human rights perspective, viewing human needs as rights, such as the right to health care, the right to adequate food, the right to housing. Dr. Healy notes that the principles that guide social work are closely aligned with those of the human rights movement. “The purpose of both is to recognize the dignity of every human being,” she says.

UConn is also home to the Human Rights Institute, which in 2013 collaborated with the School of Social Work to host a conference on human rights and social work education. School of Social Work faculty Dr. Kathryn Libal, Dr. Healy, Dr. S. Megan Berthold, and Dr. Rebecca Thomas all served as co-editors of the new book, Advancing Human Rights in Social Work Education (CSWE Press, 2014).

“UConn’s School of Social Work holds a wealth of knowledge and experience in the areas of international social work and human rights. As a new faculty member in the School of Social Work, I was struck by the depth of commitment among our faculty to human rights issues. I look forward to facilitating collaborations that will result in expanded extramural support for our international scholars.”

Dr. Michael Fendrich, associate dean for research and professor of social work

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Dr. S. Megan Berthold is an internationally recognized expert on the experience of survivors of genocide, torture, and other human rights abuses. In the late 1980s to early 1990s she worked in a first asylum camp for Vietnamese boatpeople in the Philippines and in a camp for 200,000 displaced Cambodians on the Thai-Cambodian border. She spent more than 20 years in Los Angeles working with agencies serving refugees and asylum-seekers, including the Program for Torture Victims.

She collaborated with the RAND Corporation on a longitudinal federally funded epidemiological study of Cambodian genocide survivors living in California, which found that they experienced elevated rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and co-occurring chronic health conditions. In a recent study of Cambodian refugees in Connecticut and Western Massachusetts, Berthold and her collaborators found elevated rates of psychiatric disorders, as well as diabetes, hypertension, and stroke. Working with Connecticut-based Khmer Health Advocates, Dr. Tom Buckley of the UConn School of Pharmacy, and Dr. Julie Wagner of the UConn School of Dental Medicine, Berthold is now developing a proposal to study if mHealth and an innovative Community Approach to Managing Health Program (CAMHP) model changes health behaviors and lifts barriers to care for Cambodian and Latino/a adults with complex health conditions and significant health disparities. She is the author of Human Rights-Based Approaches to Clinical Social Work (Springer, 2015).
Dr. Robert Fisher writes on the past and present of community organizing and the difficulties of advancing human rights and economic justice initiatives in an increasingly private world. He recently received his third Fulbright award, which will support teaching and research at the University of Innsbruck in Austria.

He will examine the “turn to community” trend as an alternative to the welfare state in Austria, a small nation where the social welfare state is still relatively intact. He aims to use his findings in a project comparing state, market, and civil society developments in the United States, United Kingdom, and Austria.


Dr. Kathryn Libal, associate director of the UConn Human Rights Institute, is an expert in the history and current formations of social welfare in Turkey and the Middle East. With School of Social Work colleague Dr. Scott Harding, she has traveled extensively in Turkey, Jordan, and Syria, conducting interviews to understand the politics of humanitarian outreach for Iraqi refugees. They will return to Jordan in spring 2015 to explore future projects. Dr. Libal also writes on the topic of human rights law, and how it might inform policy-making in the United States. She is currently studying food insecurity in this country, conducting extensive interviews with anti-hunger advocates in New England. She finds that master’s level social workers are generally not involved in the process of helping clients get food assistance; her goal is to educate social workers to take a more effective role in “food justice mobilization.” She is also coauthor of *Human Rights-Based Community Practice in the United States* (Springer, 2014).

Dr. Rebecca Thomas, director of UConn’s Center for International Social Work Studies, uses a human rights framework to study issues of economic justice, capacity-building, and economic and social development in the local and international arena. She is particularly interested in evidence-based programs that support welfare-to-work programs or ways in which people can generate income for themselves and their families. She conducted qualitative research on the practice of sending remittances from immigrants in the United States to their families in the Caribbean, and is launching a new project to examine remittances in Armenia, made by citizens working and living outside of that country. Dr. Thomas examines the impact of remittance arrangements on families.

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For more information:

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