

Careers in Social Work

- **What is Social Work?**
- **Social Work/Social Welfare**
- **Social Work Settings**
- **Graduate Education in Social Work**
- **Professional Licensure & Certification**

What is Social Work?

Social work is the practice of helping people use their social environment to meet their needs. Social environment consists of any family, friends, groups, organizations, agencies or government around the person. Social work as such wasn't really seen as a profession nor was the term used much until the early 1900s. By the 1940s, social casework, social group work and community organizations became the three largest practice concentrations.

- Casework is direct contact between individuals and their families in need.
- Group work is working with several people at one time in a group setting.
- Community organization focuses on neighborhoods and larger groups of people.

In 1955 seven associations that had up to that time represented all of the social work practices joined together to form the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the largest social work association today. A professional social worker had a Master's degree in social work (MSW), and the majority worked as social caseworkers.

Social Work/Social Welfare

The concept of Social Welfare goes back to the first organized efforts of the public to help its poor. It coincides with the Industrial Revolution and labor legislation from the eighteenth century. Social workers are professionals and the majority of them do work in the social welfare system. However, social welfare is an institutional arrangement that also uses many other professionals, such as nurses, doctors and psychologists.

The concern of social workers have expanded into the entire social environment. Social workers have to know a great deal about social systems that they work in, including the social welfare system. They have to have skill in getting individuals and organizations to work together for the best interest of the client or families for whom they are working. Social welfare is only one system that a social worker works in, but it is probably the one most people think about when they think of social work.

Today there are two main categories of social work:

Direct Services work directly with people in one of three ways: casework, group work, and community organization. Many social workers work with all three functions. In direct services one may have to deal with individuals and their problems one on one, or one may work with families or in small groups. One may also work with larger groups and do community work.

Indirect Services perform services on behalf of people rather than directly with them. These might entail work in administration, policy making, or teaching. Such social workers might direct or design programs. Also with other staff they might develop policy and procedures to improve the delivery of services. They might work with community agencies and teach staff or students. Indirect service may mean doing research, program evaluation, policy analysis, and statistical analysis. It may also mean coordinating social services with other services, developing budgets, conducting audits or performing management duties.

Today, professional social work is a dynamic, growth profession based on knowledge drawn from the social sciences and its own research and practice. It has a code of ethics, a variety of practice standards and a nationwide system of accredited education programs designed to meld the impulse to help others with the skill and knowledge need to provide that help.

Those who seek a career in social work should be willing to commit themselves to a special way of life, as does any professional. A professional is often defined as one who is expected to have a sense of autonomy, a belief in self-regulation, a commitment to service, and a conception of work as a calling rather than a job. Social workers aptly fit that description.

For those who can make the professional commitment, social work offers the broadest possible range of practice settings. Social workers provide their services in hospitals, schools, prisons, family service agencies, nursing homes, employee assistance programs, community mental health centers and community service agencies.

They are administrators at all levels of government. They are educators. An increasing number are opening up their own private practices. And a number have undertaken political or legislative careers finding that the skills they learned and the values they acquired as social workers are valuable assets.

Social Work Settings

Social workers can be found in any location where people work with people. The work setting will affect:

- Duties
- The way things are handled
- Working conditions
- The methods of social work practice used
- Clients
- Salary and work benefits

Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Social workers provide the bulk of mental health services in the U.S. and do so in a variety of settings, including private practice. Their chief goal is to help clients recognize a given problem and enable them to cope with it, to reach self-sufficiency, rather than become dependent on the care provider. Social workers have worked diligently to change misguided notions about mental health care so that those who need it

can seek out free of doubt and fear of disapproval. They also help promote quality care, access to it and the protection of the rights of the mentally ill.

Child and Family Social Work

This area of social services, both public and private, is the largest employer of social workers. Availability of funds through taxes and through private donations helps decide how many services will be provided and who will be served.

Public services depend on which services the government mandates as must-provide services and the amount of funding the government grants for these services. Also, social work specialization and the services provided vary with changes in social concerns.

When people lose their jobs, when single parents have young dependent children and cannot work, when chronic illness or the conditions of poverty prevent self-sufficiency, society provides either temporary help or long-term assistance through a variety of public welfare programs. Social workers not only provide direct service to those in need, but also develop public policy to ensure that these programs adequately meet needs.

In extremely difficult situations, the social worker may arrange for the child's placement in a foster home or for termination of parental rights and adoption. The child's safety and well-being are the primary considerations in such cases, although every effort is made to keep the family intact.

Health Care

Social workers are a vital part of the health care team along with doctors, nurses, and other health and mental health professionals. Health care, in the home as well as in the hospital, offers rapidly expanding employment opportunities for the social worker.

Social workers may also work in hospitals, hospices, health maintenance organizations (HMOs), nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and offices of physicians. Social workers in the medical setting may be caseworkers, medical social workers or clinical social workers.

Health-related services outside of an institution are referred to as primary care. Social work has expanded into a variety of health organizations. You may find them in free clinics, community mental health centers, union health centers, health maintenance organizations, group medical practices, home health agencies and industrial settings. Social workers become part of a working team to deal with the medical, social and psychological aspects of health.

Gerontology

Social workers who specialize in the field of aging plan and evaluate services for the elderly. They may also help older people and their families deal with difficulties brought on by their diminishing health and changing circumstances. Social workers help the aged and their families obtain vital health and mental health services, maintain meaningful activities and relationships, and adapt to the aging process. One of today's most pressing social work challenges is to provide services to the "sandwich generation", that is, adults who provide care for both their children and their parents.

School Social Work

Schools increasingly employ social workers to help with some of the developmental and educational problems facing children and teachers. They often are able to provide the early support many children need to become secure, self-sufficient adults. People enter school social work with backgrounds in casework, group work, clinical, or mental health specializations.

Graduate Education in Social Work (MSW)

All Master's in Social Work programs are designed to prepare professional personnel for advanced social work practice. MSW programs emphasize key components of successful social work practice, including evaluation and ongoing professional development. An MSW program includes both academic coursework and field education, and has three components: foundation, concentration and elective work. The strength of academic coursework coupled with the quality of the professional field training are key in making a program well-respected among human service employers.

The MSW is generally required for positions in mental health and always needed for supervisory, research, or administrative positions. The MSW is preferred for clinical positions and is essential for social workers in private practice. At present, there are 238 accredited MSW programs in the country. Check for accreditation at <http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/Accredited-Programs.aspx>. Previous training in social work is not required for entry into a MSW graduate program, however courses in psychology, sociology, economics, and political science are recommended.

General Course Work within MSW Programs

Foundation: During the first year students study human behavior and the social environment, social welfare policy and services, research, practice methods, special "at risk" populations groups, values, and ethics. Students apply this common set of knowledge, skills and values in foundation fieldwork.

Concentration: To develop specialized knowledge and skills in a particular field of practice, students select one of a number of concentrations offered by each individual school of social work depending on the faculty and research interests of the department. Courses focus on problems and people at risk, social service delivery, social policy analysis, intervention roles and methods, and critical evaluation of practice. Students apply this knowledge in fieldwork related to their career

interests. Areas of concentration will vary from program to program. Some examples of the more traditional concentrations are:

- Children and Family Services
- Gerontology
- Health
- Mental Health
- Social and Economic Development

Electives: Students choose additional courses, fieldwork or a specialization to meet elective requirements. Some examples of elective areas are:

- Family Therapy
- Women's Issues
- Management/Administration
- Ethnic Populations
- Employee Assistance
- Chemical Dependencies
- Research and Social Policy

Fieldwork: One exciting aspect of the MSW curriculum is the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to practice with professional supervision. In addition to the course work at the foundation and concentration levels, students must successfully complete fieldwork experiences.

Professional Licensure & Certification

All 50 states have licensing or certification laws regarding social work practice and the use of professional titles. Licensure regulates both the title and the practice of social work. Licensure is considered a form of public protection as it regulates the scope or practice and the conduct of those who practice social work.

Licensure requirements vary from state to state. The Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) is a nationally recognized license with specific requirements to meet national standards as well as state criteria. In California, requirements for the LCSW are:

- A graduate degree in social work with a clinical/mental health concentration from an accredited MSW program
- 3200 hours of supervised work experience and a minimum of 104 supervised weeks after completion of the MSW program
- Completion of required coursework
- Passage of California Law and Ethics Exam
- Passage of the National Clinical Exam. The State of California Board of Behavioral Science Examiners located in Sacramento is the licensing authority. For more information on licensing requirements contact that office

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directly. http://www.bbs.ca.gov/app-reg/lcs_requirement.shtml

The National Association of Social Workers offers certification and awards membership in the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW). <http://www.naswdc.org/credentials/credentials/acsw.asp>

The requirements for ACSW membership include:

- A graduate degree from a school of social work accredited by the Council of Social Work Education
- Documented two years of postgraduate social work employment and supervision by an MSW credentialed supervisor
- Current NASW membership
- Completion of the official application and payment of the appropriate fees
- Professional evaluations validating the applicant's knowledge, understanding and application of social work principles and values from an MSW supervisor and two social work colleagues
- Verified 20 hours of relevant continuing education