

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

NASW Standards for  
**Clinical**  

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**Social Work**  
in Social Work Practice



2005



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Clinical  

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Social Work  
in Social Work Practice

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# Standards

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## **for Clinical Social Work in Social Work Practice**

### **Standard 1. Ethics and Values**

Clinical social workers shall adhere to the values and ethics of the social work profession, utilizing the *NASW Codes of Ethics* as a guide to ethical decision making.

### **Standard 2. Specialized Practice Skills and Intervention**

Clinical social workers shall demonstrate specialized knowledge and skills for effective clinical intervention with individuals, families, and groups.

### **Standard 3. Referrals**

Clinical social workers shall be knowledgeable about community services and make appropriate referrals, as needed.

### **Standard 4. Accessibility to Clients**

Clinical social workers shall be accessible to clients during nonemergency and emergency situations.

### **Standard 5. Privacy and Confidentiality**

Clinical social workers shall maintain adequate safeguards for the private nature of the treatment relationship.

### **Standard 6. Supervision and Consultation**

Clinical social workers shall maintain access to professional supervision and/or consultation.

### **Standard 7. Professional Environment and Procedures**

Clinical social workers shall maintain professional offices and procedures.

### **Standard 8. Documentation**

Documentation of services provided to or on behalf of the client shall be recorded in the client's file or record of services.

### **Standard 9. Independent Practice**

Clinical social workers shall have the right to establish an independent practice.

### **Standard 10. Cultural Competence**

Clinical social workers shall demonstrate culturally competent service delivery in accordance with the *NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*.

### **Standard 11. Professional Development**

Clinical social workers shall assume personal responsibility for their continued professional development in accordance with the *NASW Standards for Continuing Professional Education* and state requirements.

### **Standard 12. Technology**

Clinical social workers shall have access to computer technology and the Internet, as the need to communicate via e-mail and to seek information on the Web for purposes of education, networking, and resources is essential for efficient and productive clinical practice.

Adopted by the NASW Board of Directors  
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## Introduction

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Clinical social workers represent the largest group of behavioral health practitioners in the nation. They are often the first to diagnose and treat people with mental disorders and various emotional and behavioral disturbances. Clinical social workers are essential to a variety of client-centered settings, including community mental health centers, hospitals, substance use treatment and recovery programs, schools, primary health care centers, child welfare agencies, aging services, employee assistance programs, and private practice settings.

Clinical social work has a primary focus on the mental, emotional, and behavioral well-being of individuals, couples, families, and groups. It centers on a holistic approach to psychotherapy and the client's relationship to his or her environment. Clinical social work views the client's relationship with his or her environment as essential to treatment planning.

Clinical social work is a state-regulated professional practice. It is guided by state laws and regulations. In most instances, clinical social workers are required to have the following credentials:

- a master's degree from a social work program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education
- a minimum of two years or 3,000 hours of post-master's degree experience in a supervised clinical setting
- a clinical license in the state of practice.

Clinical social work is broadly based and addresses the needs of individuals, families, couples, and groups affected by life changes and challenges, including mental disorders and other behavioral disturbances. Clinical social workers seek to provide essential services in the environments, communities, and social systems that affect the lives of the people they serve.

## Goals of the Standards

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Clinical social workers are committed to the delivery of competent services to individuals, families, couples, and groups. Therefore, they shall recognize the client's role in his or her treatment planning and the client's right to have a knowledgeable, skilled practitioner who is guided by sound ethical practice.

These *Standards for Clinical Social Work Practice* set forth by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) are intended to guide clinical social workers in all clinical settings. Specifically, the goals of the standards are to:

- maintain or improve the quality of services provided by clinical social workers
- establish professional expectations to assist social workers in monitoring and evaluating their clinical practice
- provide a framework for clinical social workers to assess responsible, professional behavior
- inform consumers, government regulatory bodies, and others about the professional standards for clinical social work practice.

The scope of clinical social work extends across many practice settings and populations. It is anticipated that these standards will reinforce and support current clinical practice in all settings, while affirming the value of clinical social work services as a discrete practice area.

## Definitions

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### **Client/Patient/Consumer**

Social workers generally use the term “client” to refer to the individual, group, family, or community that seeks or is provided with professional services. The client is often seen as both the individual and the client system or those in the client’s environment. The term “consumer” is also used in settings that view the client as the consumer, that is, one capable of deciding what is best for her or himself and encourages self-advocacy and self-judgment in negotiating the social service and welfare system. The term “patient” is more commonly used by social workers employed in health care settings (Barker, 2003). The term patient may also be used for insurance reimbursement purposes in health and mental health settings.

### **Clinical Social Work**

*Clinical social work* is the professional application of social work theory and methods to the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of psychosocial dysfunction, disability, or impairment, including emotional, mental, and behavioral disorders (Barker, 2003).

### **Counseling**

This is a procedure that is often used in clinical social work and other professions to guide individuals, families, couples, groups, and communities by such activities as delineating alternatives, helping to articulate goals, and providing needed information (Barker, 2003).

### **Person-in-Environment Perspective**

This orientation views the client as part of an environmental system. It encompasses reciprocal relationships and other influences between an individual, relevant others, and the physical and social environment (Barker, 2003).

### **Psychodynamic**

This word pertains to the cognitive, emotional, and volitional mental processes that consciously and unconsciously motivate an individual's behavior. These processes are the product of the interplay among a person's genetic and biological heritage, the sociocultural milieu, past and current realities, perceptual abilities and distortions, and his or her unique experiences and memories (Barker, 2003).

### **Psychotherapy**

Psychotherapy is a specialized, formal interaction between a social worker or other mental health professional and a client (either individual, couple, family, or group) in which a therapeutic relationship is established to help resolve symptoms of mental disorder, psychosocial stress, relationship problems, and difficulties in coping in the social environment. Types of psychotherapy include,

but are not limited to family therapy, group therapy, cognitive–behavioral therapy, psychosocial therapy, and psychodrama (Barker, 2003).

### **Therapy**

This is a systematic process designed to remedy, cure, or abate some disease, disability, or problem. This term is often used by social workers as a synonym for individual psychotherapy, conjoint therapy, couples therapy, psychosocial therapy, or group therapy (Barker, 2003).

## **Standards for Clinical Social Work in Social Work Practice**

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### **Standard 1. Ethics and Values**

**Clinical social workers shall adhere to the values and ethics of the social work profession, utilizing the *NASW Code of Ethics* as a guide to ethical decision making.**

### **Interpretation**

The social work mission is rooted in six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 1999). All social workers have a responsibility to embrace these values as a service to clients, the profession, self, colleagues, and society. In delivering clinical social work services, the social worker's primary responsibility is to his or her client. Clinical social workers shall acknowledge the right of clients to receive competent psychosocial services and demonstrate a commitment to act on professional judgment and convictions,

which are informed by the *NASW Code of Ethics* (1999).

Clinical social workers shall be prepared for the challenges that encompass the assessment and treatment of people with mental disorders and behavioral or emotional disturbances.

This includes maintaining a commitment to the client while simultaneously demonstrating responsibility to the practice setting, society, and local, state, and federal policies and regulations governing the social worker's clinical practice. In the event that conflicts arise among competing interests, social workers are directed to the *NASW Code of Ethics* as one of the reference points for decision making. Services should only be provided in a setting in which the professional relationship can be maintained. Clinical social workers should adhere to the *NASW Code of Ethics* with regard to limits on private and/or dual relationships with clients.

## **Standard 2. Specialized Practice Skills and Interventions**

**Clinical social workers shall demonstrate specialized knowledge and skills for effective clinical interventions with individuals, families, couples, and groups.**

### **Interpretation**

Drawing on knowledge of systems theory, person-in-environment orientation, psychodynamic theory, interpersonal dynamics, and family systems, clinical social workers shall be familiar with social, psychological, cultural, and health factors that influence the mental, emotional, and behavioral functioning of the client. They

shall have knowledge of theories of personality and behavior and be aware of sociocultural and environmental influences, as well as conditions that have an impact on the physical and emotional state of the client.

In addition to the above, clinical social workers shall have the ability to:

- establish and maintain a relationship of mutual respect, acceptance, and trust
- gather and interpret social, personal, environmental, and health information
- evaluate and treat problems within their scope of practice
- establish achievable treatment goals with the client
- facilitate cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes consistent with treatment goals
- evaluate the effectiveness of treatment services provided to the client
- identify appropriate resources and assessment instruments, as needed
- advocate for client services
- collaborate effectively with other social work or allied professionals, when appropriate.

When additional knowledge and skills are required to address clients' needs, the clinical social worker shall seek appropriate training, supervision, or consultation, or refer the client to a professional with the appropriate expertise. Clinical social workers shall limit the scope of their practice to those clients for whom they have the knowledge, skill, and resources to serve. They shall be accountable for all aspects of their professional judgment, behavior, and decisions.

### **Standard 3. Referrals**

**Clinical social workers shall be knowledgeable about community services and make appropriate referrals, as needed.**

#### **Interpretation**

To ensure that clients receive optimal psychosocial services, it is sometimes beneficial to collaborate or coordinate services with appropriate community programs to strengthen or improve the continuity of care. Clinical social workers shall be knowledgeable about available community resources and advocate on behalf of the client for appropriate services. The clinical social worker shall maintain collaborative contacts with social work or other related professionals and make appropriate referrals, as needed. The clinical social worker shall not share information about the client without the client's informed consent or as otherwise indicated in Standard 5.

### **Standard 4. Accessibility to Clients**

**Clinical social workers shall be accessible to their clients.**

#### **Interpretation**

Clinical social workers shall be available to provide clinical services to clients during regularly scheduled appointment times or sessions. In addition, the clinical social worker shall develop emergency plans or be available to the client for emergency coverage during vacations, holidays, illnesses, and at other times when the office may be closed. Arrangements or plans and procedures for emergency coverage shall be made in partnership with competent mental health



professionals or reputable institutions and should be discussed with the client at the initial face-to-face interview.

In addition, the office setting should be accessible and/or have helping devices for persons with disabilities, or office limitations should be discussed prior to scheduling appointments.

### **Standard 5. Privacy and Confidentiality**

**Clinical social workers shall maintain adequate safeguards for the private nature of the treatment relationship.**

#### **Interpretation:**

Confidentiality is a basic principle of social work intervention. It ensures the client that what is shared with the social worker will remain confidential, unless there is an ethical or legal exception. All information related to or obtained from the client by the clinical social worker shall be viewed as private and confidential. Clinical social workers shall be familiar and comply with local, state, and federal mandates governing privacy and confidentiality, such as the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) requirements and state medical records laws.

Information obtained by the social worker from or about the client shall be viewed as private and confidential, unless the client gives informed consent for the social worker to release or discuss the information with another party. There may be other exceptions to confidentiality as required by law or professional ethics. Social workers should be

familiar with national, state, and local exceptions to confidentiality, such as mandates to report when the client is a danger to self or others and for reporting child or elder abuse and neglect. The clinical social worker shall advise the client of confidentiality limitations and requirements at the beginning of treatment.

Professional judgment in the use of confidential information shall be based on best practice, as well as legal, and ethical considerations.

**Standard 6. Supervision and Consultation**  
**Clinical social workers shall maintain access to professional supervision and/or consultation.**

**Interpretation**

Clinical social workers should ensure that professional social work supervision is available to them in a clinical setting for the first five years of their professional experience (NASW, 2004). If clinical social worker supervisors are not available or accessible, case consultation may be obtained from qualified professionals of other related disciplines. Those clinical social workers with more than five years of clinical experience shall use consultation on an as-needed, self-determined basis. Clinical social workers shall adhere to state and federal statutes and regulations regarding supervision and consultation in their states of practice.

When appropriate, clinical social workers should offer their expertise to individuals, groups, and organizations, as well as offer training and mentoring opportunities to

beginning social workers or those making the transition into clinical social work. In addition, experienced clinical social workers who are able should offer supervision to social workers seeking state licensure for clinical social work practice.

### **Standard 7. Professional Environment and Procedures**

**Clinical social workers shall maintain professional offices and procedures.**

#### **Interpretation**

Agencies providing clinical social work services and clinical social workers in private or independent practice shall develop and implement written policies that describe their office procedures, such as the client's rights, including the right to privacy and confidentiality; notices and authorizations; procedures for release of information, fee agreements; procedures for payment; cancellation policy; and coverage of services during emergency situations or when the clinical social worker is not available. These policies shall be made available to and reviewed with each client at the beginning of treatment. Clinical social workers should maintain appropriate liability insurance and have a current working knowledge of risk management issues.

In addition to the above, the treatment setting shall be properly maintained to ensure a reasonable degree of comfort, privacy, and security for the social worker and the client.

### **Standard 8. Documentation**

**Documentation of services provided to, or on behalf of, the client shall be recorded in the client's file or record of services.**

#### **Interpretation**

Clinical social workers must document all services rendered to clients and keep the records in a secure location, maintaining them as private and confidential records. Documentation must reflect an accurate account of services. Progress notes, reports, and summaries of services shall be regularly recorded in the client's file and be consistent with all applicable local, state, and federal statutory, regulatory, or policy requirements. Records must meet current federal provisions regarding privacy, security, and electronic transactions standards and code sets.

### **Standard 9. Independent Practice**

**Clinical social workers shall have the right to establish an independent practice.**

#### **Interpretation:**

Clinical social workers may establish an independent solo or group practice. When doing so, they shall ensure that all services, including diagnostic and treatment planning, meet professional standards. When clinical social workers employ staff, they, as employers, bear responsibility for the competency of all services provided; maintaining clinical and ethical standards; and upholding all local, state, and federal regulations.

To avoid conflicts of interest, clinical social workers who are both employed by agencies

and have independent practices shall not refer agency clients to themselves without prior agreement with the agency and consent of the client. In addition, the clinical social worker shall have offered alternative options to the client, such as transferring the client to another treatment provider within the agency or terminating services.

Clinical social workers in private or independent practice may bill third-party payers or their clients for services rendered. Clients shall be provided with all invoices and receipts in a timely manner. When a client can no longer afford services—or a third-party payer or an agency terminates services—an alternative mutually agreed upon with the client may be instituted, which could include, for example, a referral, termination of services, a sliding scale, or pro bono services. If services continue, consideration must be given to any applicable federal or state laws and regulations as well as insurance or managed care contracts that may limit the type of continuing care.

When a client chooses to terminate treatment, the clinical social worker will offer to aid the client in exploring barriers to treatment and re-examine the treatment plan to help the client reach termination constructively. When appropriate, the clinical social worker shall refer the client to another qualified treatment provider.

#### **Standard 10. Cultural Competence**

**Clinical social workers shall demonstrate culturally competent service delivery in accordance with the *NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*.**

## **Interpretation**

The increasingly diverse population seeking psychosocial services requires that clinical social workers raise their awareness and appreciation of cultural differences. Clinical social workers shall have, and continue to develop, specialized knowledge and understanding about history, traditions, values, and family systems as they relate to clinical practice with individuals, families, and groups. Clinical social workers shall be knowledgeable about and demonstrate practice skills consistent with the *NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* (2001). In addition, clinical social workers need to be knowledgeable about the deleterious effects of racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism or homophobia, anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, classism, and disability-based discrimination on clients' behavior, mental and emotional well-being, and course of treatment. Clinical social workers must also recognize racial, ethnic, and cultural differences that may be interpreted as barriers to treatment and develop skills to ameliorate such barriers.

## **Standard 11. Professional Development**

**Clinical social workers shall assume personal responsibility for their continued professional development in accordance with the *NASW Standards for Continuing Professional Education* and state requirements.**

## **Interpretation**

To practice effectively, clinical social workers must remain knowledgeable about emerging theories and interventions, best practice models in the social work profession, and changes in policies and regulatory reforms

such as the HIPAA regulations. Clinical social workers shall seek to enhance their skills and understanding by staying abreast of research to ensure that their practice reflects the most current knowledge. Clinical social workers should also seek continuing education about risk management and professional liability issues.

Numerous opportunities in professional development are available through NASW and other professional organizations or institutions, coalitions, and service agencies at local, state, and national levels. Clinical social workers should regularly participate in and contribute to professional conferences and training activities and contribute to and promote professional publications.

#### **Standard 12. Technology**

**Clinical social workers shall have access to computer technology and the Internet, as the need to communicate via e-mail and to seek information on the Web for purposes of education, networking, and resources is essential for efficient and productive clinical practice.**

#### **Interpretation**

Clinical social workers are increasingly using the Web, computers, and other electronic technology to improve the quality of services for clients, to communicate with other professionals, and for documentation purposes. Clinical social workers should keep abreast of electronic changes that may affect practice. Technology may be integrated into clinical practice; however, appropriate safeguards for client privacy shall be used.

Clinical social workers should engage in ongoing training in technology applications relevant to clinical social work practice including assessment and treatment, research, policy, education, and resource tracking and development.

Free information on the Standards is located on the NASW Web site: [www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org).

Purchase full document from NASW Press at 1.800.227.3590.

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