### Background of Standards for Child Welfare

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) led the field in the development of best practices for social workers in child welfare. The NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Protection served as an initial effort to formulate standards in this important and continually evolving area of practice. Because it is essential that these standards reflect and promote sound social work practice, they have been revised and expanded beyond child protection to reflect changing practices and policies for social work practice in a variety of child welfare settings. NASW periodically revises the NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Welfare to meet the changing needs of the child welfare field. NASW has also revised these standards to reflect the values of our profession and current practice trends. These standards can be regarded as a basic tool for social work practice in child welfare that might include family preservation, family foster care, kinship care, residential group homes, adoption and independent living.

Since the NASW child protection standards were published in 1981, there have been many profound changes in the child welfare field. Child welfare systems are complex and a specialized field of practice that is affected by changes in policy, research, and practice models that continue to evolve (National Association of Social Workers, 2005).

### Introduction

Child welfare systems across the country serve some of the most vulnerable children, youth and families. These systems are designed to support families and to protect children from harm through an array of prevention and intervention services; particularly children who have been or are at risk of abuse or neglect, children with special medical or mental health needs, and unaccompanied youth. Historically, social workers have played a critical role in the child welfare system by protecting children at risk and supporting families in need (National Association of Social Workers, 2005). Studies indicate that social work degrees are the most appropriate degrees for the field of practice (Child Welfare League of America, 2003b) and have been directly linked to better outcomes for children and families.

Social workers in child welfare are often faced with critical life and death decisions while working in stressful work environments that can include high case loads and limited supervision, training and supports. State child welfare administrators have found that high caseloads and/or workloads can also contribute to staff turnover (American Public Human Services Association, 2005; Torrico Meruvia, 2010). Additionally, stressful work conditions including inadequate salaries, administrative burdens, and the fear of violence can influence the recruitment and retention of qualified staff (Whitaker et al., 2004; Torrico Meruvia, 2010).

Economic, social, and political factors also affect the child welfare system and the number of children and youth needing child welfare services. These factors challenge
current policies and practice approaches and place greater demands on the child welfare system to respond to the needs of at-risk children, youth and families.

While child welfare’s primary goal is to keep children safe in their homes, child welfare cannot be expected to bear the sole responsibility for a child’s well-being. Children and youth must also be safe at school and in their own neighborhoods. Teachers, policy officers, juvenile probation officers and child welfare workers are among the professionals that can work together to keep children and youth safe. An increasing number of communities are advocating, partnering and collaborating to provide supports designed to address their needs. Child welfare systems have changed and as we look to the future, we need more innovative efforts to build more bridges across child welfare and other systems to better serve vulnerable children, youth and their families.

**Goals of the Standards**
These standards were developed to broadly define the scope of services that child welfare social workers shall provide, that administrators should support, and that children, youth and families should expect. The standards are designed to enhance awareness of the skills, knowledge, values, methods, and sensitivity social workers need to work effectively within child welfare.

Ideally, these standards will stimulate the development and implementation of clear guidelines, goals, and objectives related to child welfare services in social work practice, research, and policy. The specific goals of the standards are:

- To establish expectations for child welfare practice and services;
- To ensure that child welfare practice are guided by the *NASW Code of Ethics*;
- To assure the highest quality of social work services are provided to children, youth and families;
- To provide a base to advocate for children, youth and families to be treated with respect and dignity and have access to supportive and confidential services, and appropriate inclusion in decision-making;
- To provide a foundation for the preparation of child welfare social workers and the development of continuing education materials and programs related to child welfare services; and
- To encourage social workers in child welfare to participate in the development and refinement of public policy, at the local, state, and federal levels, to support the well-being of children and youth.

**Definitions**

**Advocacy**
The act of supporting the rights of individuals or communities through interventions or empowerment (Barker, R.L., 2003).
Caseload
The individuals, generally counted as children, youth or families, for whom the social worker is responsible.

Child Welfare Services
Child welfare systems encompass a range of services (e.g., family preservation, child protective, in-home services, out-of-home placements; and adoption services) ranging from prevention, intervention and treatment. Services are intended to protect children and their well-being; strengthen families; and provide permanency when children cannot safely remain with their families. Child welfare services should be strength based, family centered and respectful of a family’s culture, values, customs, beliefs and needs (Child Welfare League of America, 2005).

Collaboration
The process in which individuals and organizations work together toward a common purpose.

Culture
The term culture includes ways in which individuals with disabilities or individuals from various race, ethnic, religious, or sexual orientations experience the world around them.

Culture Competence
“The ability of individuals and systems to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and faiths or religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms and values the worth of individuals, families, tribes, and communities, and protects and preserves the dignity of each” (Child Welfare League of America, n.d.).

Evidence-based practice (EBP)
“The use of the best available scientific knowledge derived from randomized controlled outcome studies, and meta-analyses of existing outcome studies, as one basis for guiding professional interventions and effective therapies, combined with professional ethical standards, clinical judgment, and practice wisdom”(Barker, R.L., 2003).

Out-Of-Home Care
Out-of-home care describes an array of services, including family foster care, kinship care, and group residential care for children or youth who have been placed in the custody of the state and who require living arrangements away from their birth parents.

Permanency Planning
Permanency planning is a process that intends to limit placement into, and the time spent in, out-of-home care. It includes planned and systematic efforts to ensure that
children and youth are in safe and nurturing life long, family relationships (Child Welfare League of America, n.d.).

Social Worker
Social workers are professionals who possess a degree in social work from a school or program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education. Social workers help individuals increase their capacities for problem solving and access resources; facilitate interactions; make organizations responsible to people and influence social policies (Barker, R.L., 2003). Licensing and certifications regulations vary across states.

Youth Development
“Youth development is an ongoing process in which young people are engaged in meeting their basic needs and developing the skill and competencies needed to become contributing members of society (Child Welfare League of America, 2005).”

Note: The terms “social worker” and “social worker in child welfare” will be used interchangeably throughout the document.

Standards

Standard 1. Ethics and Values
Social workers in child welfare shall demonstrate a commitment to the values and ethics of the social work profession and shall use the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) as a guide to ethical decision making, while understanding the unique aspects of child welfare practice.

Interpretation
A social worker in child welfare shall demonstrate core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of relationships, integrity, and competence. In addition, social workers shall adhere to the professional ethical responsibilities delineated in the NASW Code of Ethics (2008). The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) establishes the ethical responsibilities of all social workers with respect to themselves, clients, colleagues, employees and employing organizations, the social work profession and society. Acceptance of these responsibilities guides and fosters competent social work practice in child welfare.

As an integral component of the child welfare system, social workers have the responsibility to know and comply with local, state, and federal legislations, regulations, and policies. In some instances, legal and regulatory guidelines and administrative practices may conflict with the best interests of the child and/or family. In the event that conflicts arise among competing expectations, child welfare social workers are directed to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) as a tool in their decision making.
Standard 2. Qualifications, Knowledge and Practice Requirements
Social workers practicing in child welfare shall hold a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or Master of Social Work (MSW) degree from an accredited school of social work. All social workers in child welfare shall demonstrate a working knowledge of current theory and practice in child welfare and general knowledge of state and federal child welfare laws.

Interpretation
The knowledge requirements considered fundamental to all social work practice, which are met by completion of BSW and MSW programs within colleges and universities and accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), must include knowledge about the history and development of social work, including child welfare. Social workers in child welfare shall also possess working knowledge related to child development, parenting, family dynamics and community systems where the child or family resides. In addition, social workers in child welfare shall have a proven ability to apply this knowledge to appropriately intervene in family, organizational, or social systems. These interventions should help to address the needs of children and families. Interventions should also aim to prevent harm to the child and maximize the family’s changes for positive functioning and stability. Hiring requirements of social workers in child welfare vary across the country.

Social workers practicing in child welfare shall also keep up to date on current practice models, new laws and regulations that can impact child welfare practice. Child welfare agencies must ensure information regarding new laws and federal regulations are disseminated to staff in a timely manner.

Social workers in child welfare shall seek the advice and counsel of colleagues whenever such consultation is in the best interests of clients. Consultation should include counsel and guidance from supervisors, social workers and other disciplines with relevant expertise. However, “social workers should protect the confidentiality of all information obtained in the course of professional service, except for compelling professional reasons” (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008). Social workers shall disclose confidential information when appropriate and with written consent from the client (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008).

Standard 3. Professional Development
Social workers in child welfare shall continuously build their knowledge and skills to provide the most current, beneficial and culturally appropriate services to children, youth and families involved in child welfare.

Interpretation
Social workers in child welfare shall adhere to the NASW Standards for Continuing Professional Education (2003) and follow state professional or licensing regulations
regarding continuing education requirements. Ongoing professional development is critical for ensuring quality social work services for children, youth, and families. Social workers shall participate in professional development activities that enhance their knowledge and skills. Frequent participation in educational opportunities can help social workers to maintain and increase proficiency in service delivery.

Social workers in child welfare shall also contribute to the development of the profession by educating and supervising social work interns when possible.

**Standard 4. Advocacy**
Social workers in child welfare shall seek to advocate for resources and system reforms that will improve services for children, youth, and families.

**Interpretation**
Social workers shall use their skills and knowledge to advocate for the well-being of children, youth, and their families. This advocacy includes helping them access and effectively use formal and informal community resources that enable youth and families to self-advocate. Advocacy efforts should also be directed at improving administrative and public policies to support children and their families. Advocacy efforts should emphasize the strengths and assets approach in the development of social services and child welfare programs, as well as the use of evidence-based practice and policies.

**Standard 5. Collaboration**
Social workers in child welfare shall promote interdisciplinary and interorganizational collaboration to support, enhance and deliver effective services to children, youth, and families.

**Interpretation**
Multiple service providers often serve children, youth, and families involved with child welfare. Social workers shall understand the roles and goals of other professionals and shall work toward more effective collaboration and understanding. Such collaborations can include the multi-disciplinary team, community leaders and other service providers in law enforcement, the medical health field, housing authorities, school districts, public health agencies or adult services. Collaborations can ensure that children, youth, and families access services, do not receive a duplication of services and are positioned to avoid crisis.

**Standard 6. Record Keeping and Confidentiality of Client Information**
Social workers in child welfare shall maintain the appropriate safeguards for the privacy and confidentiality of client information.

**Interpretation**
Social workers in child welfare shall protect client information at all times. Access to client information (paper and electronic) must be maintained securely. Records shall be maintained according to federal, state, and local laws and mandates. Social workers in child welfare shall also conform to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008).

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 also 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 and neglect. Clients should be informed of the agency’s confidentiality requirements and limitations before services are initiated.

Social workers shall utilize available technology to increase the efficiency of services in a way that ensures the protection of clients’ rights and privacy. Technology can help social workers in child welfare to manage workloads, reduce duplication of services, and increase their timely service delivery. The Internet, e-mail, electronic case record systems, and data analysis software have increased the efficiency of child welfare services. The Internet has become a place for organizations to educate the public and prospective clients about the services they provide. Internet adoption photo-listings have drastically increased the accessibility of information available about children awaiting adoption. E-mail has increased social workers’ abilities to communicate with clients and other service providers and is being used as a mechanism for providing counseling and education services. Electronic case record systems and data analysis software have increased the speed and accuracy of accessing, aggregating, and analyzing client data. Although these advances have greatly improved service delivery, administrators and social workers must ensure that confidential client information is protected at all times. Social workers shall also acknowledge that while technology can help workers to be more efficient, it cannot take the place of in person client engagement.

**Standard 7. Cultural Competence**
Social workers shall ensure that families are provided services within the context of multicultural understanding and competence.

**Interpretation**
Social workers in child welfare shall demonstrate heightened self-awareness, reflective practice skills and knowledge consistent with the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (2001). Social workers shall continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding regarding culturally appropriate resources for the children, youth and families they serve. Supervisors should also develop trainings for social workers on culturally competent practice. When providing services, social
workers shall explore the role of spirituality, religion, sexual orientation, and age as factors influencing perspective.

Consideration should also be given to addressing the particular needs of other children of color who are over represented in the child welfare system. If children are placed with foster parents of a different race, ethnicity, or culture, foster parents should receive training, when appropriate.

There has been an increase in the number of immigrants and their children in the United States; such changes affect the needs that child welfare services address. Social workers in child welfare shall become familiar with the latest data on population changes in their region related to immigrant children and their families. Such changes will require learning about the emerging immigrant cultural heritage, their needs, and support networks. Social workers shall also familiarize themselves with immigration laws and collaborate with appropriate immigration specialists to explore immigration relief options.

**Standard 8. Assessment**
Social workers in child welfare shall assess children, youth and families on an ongoing basis in an effort to gather important information to develop and amend plans for child welfare services.

**Interpretation**
The social worker must be able to assess imminent risk and ensure that arrangements are made to protect the child in accordance with state and federal laws, agency policies, and administrative directives governing child protection. Social workers in child welfare should be clear with the family about the reasons for services, inform them of their rights, and facilitate legal representation. Social workers shall treat the family respectfully, humanely, and professionally. The social worker shall seek to understand the family’s perspective and convey an understanding and empathy for the family’s situation or difficulties. Social workers in child welfare shall identify and promote the use of supportive and preventive services, including identifying informal supports to strengthen and enhance family functioning in order to avoid the need for child welfare services. Social workers shall recognize families’ and individuals’ protective factors and ability to improve their functioning to protect and nurture their children. Social workers shall also have knowledge of personal, familial, and social factors that can negatively affect a family’s resources to care for its members.

Social workers in child welfare shall report and document if a child’s safety is at risk to protective authorities. If the social worker’s role involves child protection, the worker is required to use the legal process available to protect the child and to document evidence and concerns to guide the child protective intervention.
Standard 9. Intervention
Social workers in child welfare shall strive to ensure the safety and well-being of children through evidence-based practices.

Interpretation
Social workers in child welfare shall remain aware of current intervention research and utilize evidence-based practices in service delivery. Interventions shall be designed to promote positive outcomes and involve children, youth and families, other team members, school personnel, and other service providers as appropriate. Interventions shall be based on on-going assessments and include goals, objectives, methods of evaluation, and outcome criteria. Social workers in child welfare shall ensure that the child’s medical, dental, mental health, developmental, cultural, spiritual, social, and recreational needs are met.

Implementation of any service plan needs to be flexible and adapted to the changing circumstances of the children, youth or family, their response to the interventions, and the social worker’s increased understanding, the child welfare system, and the larger community. The social worker shall seek the family and child’s participation, input, and feedback to ensure that service is a mutual undertaking between social worker, family, and child. Input of other community collaborators shall be sought at specific intervals and incorporated into an ongoing assessment and understanding of the child or family’s needs and response to interventions. The social worker in child welfare shall monitor and accurately document the children, youth and family’s progress and evaluate the outcome of the service plan.

Standard 10: Family Engagement
Social workers in child welfare shall engage families as partners in the process of assessment and intervention.

Interpretation
Social workers in child welfare shall be clear about the reasons for services, whether it is an investigation or services following an investigation. The social worker shall seek to understand and incorporate, as appropriate, the family’s perspective and needs and potential solutions. The social worker shall also convey an understanding and empathy for the family’s situation or difficulties and actively engage them to ensure the well-being of their family unit.

Standard 11: Youth Engagement
Social workers in child welfare shall actively engage older youth in addressing their needs while in out of home care and as they prepare to transition out of foster care.

Interpretation
Social workers shall recognize and assess the unique strengths, abilities, and specific needs of youth with regard to life and personal skills development. In addition, social workers shall implement prevention and intervention strategies grounded in youth development. Social workers shall value youths’ voice and support older youth in developing decision making skills, achieving goals and celebrating successes. Social workers and older youth shall develop a strong working relationship and plan for the future through a transition planning process that focuses on the development of independent living skills and fully addresses topics such as housing, health insurance, education, employment and permanency. Social workers shall actively engage young people in developing a transition plan early to ensure they successfully transition into adulthood.

Standard 12. Permanency Planning
Social workers in child welfare shall place children and youth in out-of-home care that meets the needs for safety, permanency, and well-being when they are unable to remain in their homes.

Interpretation
Social workers in child welfare shall consider the strengths and needs of the child and the caregiver when assessing the safety and appropriateness of placement options (e.g., kinship care, foster care, group home, etc.). Social workers shall actively work with children and youth to identify and maintain permanent connections with family, friends, and other individuals with whom the child has a relationship, except in situations where there are legal constraints, such as protective orders. Permanency can be the result of preservation of the family, reunification with the birth family, or legal guardianship or adoption by kin or other caring, committed adults (e.g., mentors, teachers, family friends, etc.).

Standard 13. Supervision
Social workers who act as supervisors or administrators in child welfare shall encourage the maintenance and the development of a positive work environment that facilitates the advancement of social workers’ skills, creates a safe and positive work environment, provides quality supervision to social workers and ensures quality service delivery to clients.

Interpretation
Social work administrators in child welfare shall ensure appropriate, effective service delivery to children and families and a supportive environment for workers. The administrator, in accordance with legal mandates, shall establish and implement the policies, procedures, and guidelines necessary for effective social work practice in child welfare. Furthermore, the administrator shall work to constantly improve services provided to clients by using written policies and procedures for monitoring day-to-day program operations to include: professional development, continuous quality
improvement systems (e.g., data collection); workload and caseload size; clients’ rights; training for leadership; and work environment safety.

Supervisors in child welfare shall possess enhanced knowledge and skills in the field and shall have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree from a social work program accredited by CSWE. They must be licensed if required by state statutes and shall have a minimum of two years experience in the field directly related to the work of the staff they are supervising. Supervisors must also possess knowledge of the political and economic factors that affect service delivery in their community and be able to mentor staff in learning to negotiate those systems.

References


