

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Standards and  
Indicators for  
Cultural  
Competence  
in Social Work Practice



Standards and  
Indicators for

Cultural  

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Competence

in Social Work Practice

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# Standards

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

Social workers shall function in accordance with the values, ethics, and standards of the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics*. Cultural competence requires self-awareness, cultural humility, and the commitment to understanding and embracing culture as central to effective practice.

## **Standard 2. Self-Awareness**

Social workers shall demonstrate an appreciation of their own cultural identities and those of others. Social workers must also be aware of their own privilege and power and must acknowledge the impact of this privilege and power in their work with and on behalf of clients. Social workers will also demonstrate cultural humility and sensitivity to the dynamics of power and privilege in all areas of social work.

## **Standard 3. Cross-Cultural Knowledge**

Social workers shall possess and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding that is inclusive of, but not limited to, the history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions such as race and ethnicity; immigration and refugee status; tribal groups; religion and spirituality; sexual orientation; gender identity or expression; social class; and mental or physical abilities of various cultural groups.

## **Standard 4. Cross-Cultural Skills**

Social workers will use a broad range of skills (micro, mezzo, and macro) and techniques that demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the importance of culture in practice, policy, and research.

## **Standard 5. Service Delivery**

Social workers shall be knowledgeable about and skillful in the use of services, resources, and institutions and be available to serve multicultural communities. They shall be able to make culturally appropriate referrals within both formal and informal networks and shall be cognizant of, and

work to address, service gaps affecting specific cultural groups.

**Standard 6. Empowerment and Advocacy**

Social workers shall be aware of the impact of social systems, policies, practices, and programs on multicultural client populations, advocating for, with, and on behalf of multicultural clients and client populations whenever appropriate. Social workers should also participate in the development and implementation of policies and practices that empower and advocate for marginalized and oppressed populations.

**Standard 7. Diverse Workforce**

Social workers shall support and advocate for recruitment, admissions and hiring, and retention efforts in social work programs and organizations to ensure diversity within the profession.

**Standard 8. Professional Education**

Social workers shall advocate for, develop, and participate in professional education and training programs that advance cultural competence within the profession. Social workers should embrace cultural competence as a focus of lifelong learning.

**Standard 9. Language and Communication**

Social workers shall provide and advocate for effective communication with clients of all cultural groups, including people of limited English proficiency or low literacy skills, people who are blind or have low vision, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and people with disabilities (Goode & Jones, 2009).

**Standard 10. Leadership to Advance Cultural Competence**

Social workers shall be change agents who demonstrate the leadership skills to work effectively with multicultural groups in agencies, organizational settings, and communities. Social workers should also demonstrate responsibility for advancing cultural competence within and beyond their organizations, helping to challenge structural and institutional oppression and build and sustain diverse and inclusive institutions and communities.



## Introduction

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This revision of the *Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in the Social Work Practice* (the Standards) reflects the growth in the understanding of cultural competence since the development of both the *NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* published in 2001 and the *Indicators for the Achievement of the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* (NASW, 2007). These revised standards are anchored in the policy statement “Cultural and Linguistic Competence in the Social Work Profession” published in *Social Work Speaks: National Association of Social Workers Policy Statements* (NASW, 2015) and the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics*, which charges social workers with the ethical responsibility to be culturally competent. The *Indicators for the Achievement of the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* was developed in 2007 as an extension of the standards to provide additional guidance on the implementation and realization of culturally competent practice.

This revision, developed by the 2015 NASW National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity, builds on the previous work to introduce new concepts and expand on others. These standards reinforce the concept of “culture” as being inclusive beyond race and ethnicity; inclusive of, but not limited to, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and religious identity or spirituality. Similarly, they reinforce the intended audience for these standards to be the broad spectrum of social work practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The revised standards retain the concept of “competence” as an indicator of attitudes, knowledge, and skills that enable effective cross-cultural practice. As with any competency, there is the expectation of continual growth and learning. The revised standards introduce concepts of “cultural humility,” as a guiding

stance vis-à-vis cultural differences, and “intersectionality,” as a way of understanding the complexity of the experiences of those at the margins of our society. In addition, the revision introduces “language and communication” to address a range of communication issues including limited English proficiency, low literacy, and disabilities. Finally, the revisions revisit the way the social work profession engages in leadership to advance cultural competence within the profession, human services, and society at large and to challenge structural and institutional oppression.

NASW “promotes and supports the implementation of cultural and linguistic competence at three intersecting levels: the individual, institutional, and societal. Cultural competence requires social workers to examine their own cultural backgrounds and identities while seeking out the necessary knowledge, skills, and values that can enhance the delivery of services to people with varying cultural experiences associated with their race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, age, or disability [or other cultural factors]” (NASW, 2015, p. 65).

The United States is constantly undergoing major demographic changes. The demographic shift is projected to continue with increased diversity in our population—American born and immigrants and refugees. In 1980, 80 percent of the population was white; in 2014, the proportion had decreased to 63 percent and is projected through 2050 to continue this decline to 44 percent (Ortman & Guarneri, n.d.). Shifts in the growth of black, Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan Native populations are projected to continue to increase, with more than 50 percent of Americans expected to belong to one of these groups by 2044 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). These demographic changes increase the diversity that social work practitioners, administrators, and

executives encounter daily in their settings. These changes affect the social work policy agenda at organizational, community, county, state, and national levels. They challenge social work educators to effectively recruit, retain, and graduate a diverse student body, and to deliver a robust curriculum that embeds the implications of cultural diversity in all aspects of social work practice. Finally, these demographic changes challenge social work researchers to examine questions of relevance to culturally diverse populations and engage in culturally competent research practices. The social work profession, with contributions of pioneers such as Richmond (1922), Reynolds (1935), and Bartlett (1970), traditionally has emphasized the importance of the person-in-environment (PIE) model to address social functioning, in which individuals experience relationships influenced by interrelated factors of environmental, physical, and emotional challenges; Karls and O'Keefe (2008) have advanced the PIE concept to address functionality. Social workers using this ecological perspective for assessment recognize the need to attend to important cultural factors that have meaning for clients.

Diversity, more than race and ethnicity, includes the sociocultural experiences of people inclusive of, but not limited to, national origin, color, social class, religious and spiritual beliefs, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, and physical or mental disabilities. The social work and human services literature includes content areas that address culturally appropriate and culturally competent interventions. These include addressing racial identity formation for people of color as well as for white people; the interrelationship among class, race, ethnicity, and gender; working with low-income families; working with older adults; the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of clients; the development of gender identity and sexual orientation; immigration, acculturation, and assimilation stressors; biculturalism; working

with people with disabilities; empowerment skills; community building; reaching out to new populations of color; conscious and unconscious bias; cultural humility, culture-specific and culturally adapted interventions; and training in culturally competent models of practice.

Cultural competence in social work practice implies a heightened consciousness of how culturally diverse populations experience their uniqueness and deal with their differences and similarities within a larger social context. Concurrently, cultural competence requires social workers to use an intersectionality approach to practice, examining forms of oppression, discrimination, and domination through diversity components of race and ethnicity, immigration and refugee status, religion and spirituality, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, social class, and abilities. Furthermore, it requires social workers to acknowledge their own position of power vis-à-vis the populations they serve and to practice cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). The achievement of cultural competence is an ongoing process.

Cultural competence is not just a statement of quality practice. Cultural competence also requires advocacy and activism. It is critically important to provide quality services to those who find themselves marginalized; and it is also essential to disrupt the societal processes that marginalize populations. Cultural competence includes action to challenge institutional and structural oppression and the accompanying feelings of privilege and internalized oppression. Although these standards and their accompanying indicators describe an ideal state, the National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity (NCORED) encourages social work practitioners and agency leaders to put forth good faith efforts to use them.

## Definitions

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In 2015 NCOED revised the definitions of culture and cultural competence and added definitions of cultural humility and intersectionality that are important to social work practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Definitions are drawn from the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics*, the 10th edition of *Social Work Speaks* (2015), the 6th edition of *The Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 2013), and other academic sources.

### **Areas of Practice**

In these standards, “practice” refers to at all levels of practice—micro, mezzo, and macro.

#### **Macro Practice**

Social work practice “aimed at bringing about improvement and changes in the general society. Such activities include some types of political action, community organization, public education campaigning, and the administration of broad-based social services agencies or public welfare departments” (Barker, 2013, p. 253).

#### **Mezzo Practice**

Refers to “social work practice primarily with families and small groups. Important activities at this level include facilitating communication, mediation, and negotiation; educating; and bringing people together” (Barker, 2013, p. 269).

#### **Micro Practice**

“The term used by social workers to identify professional activities that are designed to help solve the problems faced primarily by individuals, families, and small groups. Usually micro practice focuses on direct intervention on a case-by-case basis or in a clinical setting” (Barker, 2013, p. 269).

## **Cissexism**

Cissexism is discrimination against individuals who identify with and/or present as a different sex and gender than assigned at birth and privilege conveyed on individuals who identify with and/or present as the same sex and gender as assigned at birth. It is a form of sexism based on sexual and gender identity and expression (Hibbs, 2014).

## **Culture**

Culture is a universal phenomenon reflecting diversity, norms of behavior, and awareness of global interdependence (Link & Ramanathan, 2011).

The word “culture” implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group (Gilbert, Goode, & Dunne, 2007). Culture often is referred to as the totality of ways being passed on from generation to generation. The term “culture” includes ways in which people with disabilities or people from various religious backgrounds or people who are gay, lesbian, or transgender experience the world around them. Culture includes, but is not limited to, history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions of client groups served in the different cultures related to race and ethnicity, immigration and refugee status, tribal status, religion and spirituality, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, social class, and abilities.

The Preamble to the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics* states, “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (p. 1). And it continues, “Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice” (p. 1).

Cultural and ethnic diversity is mentioned in

two ethical standards:

(1) Value: *Social Justice*

Ethical Principle: *Social workers challenge social injustice.*

Social workers' social change efforts are focused on issues of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity.

(2) Value: *Dignity and Worth of the Person*

Ethical Principle: *Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.*

This value states that social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.

### **Cultural Competence**

Cultural competence refers to the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each (Fong, 2004; Fong & Furuto, 2001; Lum, 2011). "Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or amongst professionals and enable the system, agency, or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d., p. 1).

Operationally defined, cultural competence is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes (Davis & Donald, 1997). Competence in cross-cultural functioning means learning new patterns of behavior and effectively applying them in appropriate settings. Gallegos (1982) provided

one of the first conceptualizations of ethnic competence as “a set of procedures and activities to be used in acquiring culturally relevant insights into the problems of minority clients and the means of applying such insights to the development of intervention strategies that are culturally appropriate for these clients” (p. 4). This kind of sophisticated cultural competence does not come naturally to any social worker and requires a high level of professionalism and knowledge. Other culturally related terms exist, such as “cultural responsiveness,” “cultural proficiency,” and “cultural sensitivity.” Note that the definitions of some of these terms are similar to the definitions of cultural competence. However, others, such as “cultural sensitivity,” do not incorporate an expectation of skillful or effective action.

On the organizational level, there are five essential elements that contribute to a culturally competent system (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). The system should (1) value diversity, (2) have the capacity for cultural self-assessment, (3) be conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, (4) institutionalize cultural knowledge, and (5) develop programs and services that reflect an understanding of diversity between and within cultures. These five elements must be manifested in every level of the service delivery system. They should be reflected in attitudes, structures, policies, and services. The specific ethical standard for culturally competent social work practice is contained under Section 1 of the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics*—Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities to Clients.

### **1.05 Cultural Competence and Social Diversity**

- Social workers should understand culture and its functions in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures.
- Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients’ cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients’ cultures

and to differences among people and cultural groups.

- Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability.

Finally, the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics* reemphasizes the importance of cultural competence in Section 6: Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society.

#### **6.04 Social and Political Action**

- Social workers should act to expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups.
- Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally.
- Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people. Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability.
- Cultural competence is never fully realized, achieved, or completed; it is a lifelong process for social workers who will always encounter diverse clients and new situations in their practice. Supervisors, colleagues, and workers

should have the expectation that cultural competence is an ongoing learning process integral and central to daily supervision.

### **Cultural Humility**

For development of cultural competence knowledge, training, acquiring, and use of skill sets to be effective, we need to be both aware and attentive to the dynamic quality of culture and be committed to the practice of cultural humility. Cultural humility is an important facet of professional identity that encourages self-evolvement and evolvement of self through one's professional life. It also includes evolvement of the profession's identity that bridges social distance as well as power differential between the social worker and client systems (Ramanathan, 2014).

Cultural humility refers to the attitude and practice of working with clients at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels with a presence of humility while learning, communicating, offering help, and making decisions in professional practice and settings. According to Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998), "Cultural humility incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the patient–physician dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and nonpaternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations" (p. 117). As Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, and Utsey (2013) suggested, cultural humility is a way of maintaining an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality theory (grounded in a feminist perspective) examines forms of oppression, discrimination, and domination as they manifest themselves through diversity components (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2007; Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009; Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). These diversity

components include such multiple identities as race and ethnicity, immigration, refugee and tribal status, religion and spirituality, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, social class, and mental or physical disabilities. An intersectionality approach to social work practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels includes integrating the various diversity components and identities and approaching practice from a holistic point of view. For example, a social worker would approach a first-generation client in the context of the client's family and with recognition of the person's race and ethnicity, religion and spiritual expression, social class, sexual orientation, abilities, and other factors. Intersectionality theory is reinforced by critical race theory and social systems theory, emphasizing human behavior in the social environments. Thus, intersectionality perspective provides a comprehensive approach with a commitment to social justice and captures transactions in the PIE configuration that form the common base for social work knowledge and practice.

## Goals and Objectives

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These standards provide focus for the development of culturally competent social work practice. These standards provide guidance to social workers in all areas of social work practice in responding effectively to culture and cultural diversity in policy and practice settings.

These standards, revised in 2015, incorporate updated literature in culturally competent practice. These revised standards are intended to be inclusive of all populations served and focused on self-awareness, cultural humility, and the dynamics of power and privilege. Cultural humility, which is integral to culturally competent practice, is described and highlighted in this revision of the standards.

The specific goals of the standards are to

- enhance knowledge, skills, and values in practice and policy development relative to culturally diverse populations
- articulate specific standards to guide growth, learning, and assessment in the area of cultural competence
- establish indicators so that social workers in all areas of practice can monitor and evaluate culturally competent practice and policies in relationship to these standards
- educate consumers, governmental regulatory bodies, insurance carriers, and others about the profession's standards for culturally competent practice
- maintain or improve the quality of culturally competent services provided by social workers in agencies, programs, and private practice settings
- inform specific ethical guidelines for culturally competent social work practice in agency and private practice settings
- document standards for agencies, peer review committees, state regulatory bodies, insurance carriers, and others.

## Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice

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### Standard 1. Ethics and Values

Social workers shall function in accordance with the values, ethics, and standards of the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics*. Cultural competence requires self-awareness, cultural humility, and the commitment to understanding and embracing culture as central to effective practice.

### Interpretation

A major characteristic of a profession is its ability to establish ethical standards to help professionals identify ethical issues in practice and to guide them in determining what is ethically acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Reamer, 1998). The NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics* speaks directly to cultural competence in section 1.05, Cultural Competence and Social Diversity. The *Code of Ethics* includes a mission statement, which sets forth several key elements in social work practice, mainly the social workers' commitment to enhancing human well-being and helping meet basic human needs of all people; client empowerment; service to people who are vulnerable and oppressed; focus on individual well-being in a social context; promotion of social justice and social change; and sensitivity to cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers clearly have an ethical responsibility to be culturally competent. The NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics* also identifies service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence—all values that provide a foundation for culturally competent practice.

Regarding cultural competence the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics* states,

- Social workers should understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures.

- Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients' cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients' cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups.
- Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability.

The term “cultural humility” (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) has been introduced in these standards to underscore its importance in culturally competent practice. In relationship to child welfare practice, Ortega and Faller (2011) described a cultural humility perspective as one that “encourages workers to take into account an individual’s multiple identities and the ways in which their social experiences impact their worldview, particularly as it related to their expression of their culture. This perspective has the benefit of placing the worker in a learning mode as opposed to maintaining power, control and authority in the working relationship, especially over cultural experiences about which the client is far more knowledgeable” (p. 33). The practice of cultural humility provides greater focus on the role of the social worker as learner and listener, empowering clients as “expert” in their own lives. In this context, cultural humility is viewed as both a value and practice.

Culture may affect how individuals cope with problems and interact with each other. What is assessed as behaviorally appropriate in one culture may be assessed as problematic in another. Accepted practice in one culture may be prohibited in another. To fully understand and appreciate these differences, social workers must be familiar with varying cultural traditions and norms.

Clients' cultural backgrounds may affect their help-seeking behaviors. The ways in which social services are planned and implemented must be culturally sensitive and responsive to client needs to be effective. Cultural competence builds on the profession's ethics and values relative to self-determination and individual dignity and worth and embraces the practices of inclusion, tolerance, cultural humility, and respect for culture and diversity, broadly defined. Social workers are required to address the struggle with ethical dilemmas arising from value conflicts or special needs of marginalized clients (such as helping clients enroll in mandated training or mental health services that are culturally insensitive). Cultural competence requires social workers to recognize the strengths that exist in all cultures while renouncing cultural practices that violate human rights and dignity. For example, some cultures subjugate women, oppress people based on sexual orientation, or value the use of corporal punishment and the death penalty. Cultural competence in social work practice must be informed by and applied within the context of NASW's *Code of Ethics* and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

### **Indicators**

#### **Culturally competent social workers shall demonstrate**

1. knowledge and practice of the NASW *Code of Ethics*
2. understanding of cultural humility as integral to client self-determination and worker self-awareness
3. commitment to social justice and human rights
4. ability to describe and negotiate areas of conflict and congruity between their personal and professional values and those of other cultures.
5. ability to recognize the convergence and disparity between the values and practices of the dominant society and the values and practices of the historically oppressed, underrepresented, and underserved populations

6. respect for cultural differences and affirmation of cultural strengths
7. capacities to manage and effectively negotiate the ethical dilemmas encountered in work with marginalized groups in relation to
  - boundaries
  - conflicts in values and expectations
  - power and privilege
  - norms of behavior
  - styles of advocacy
  - diverse values and beliefs
  - dual relationships
  - styles of conflict management.

### **Standard 2. Self-Awareness**

Social workers shall demonstrate an appreciation of their own cultural identities and those of others. Social workers must also be aware of their own privilege and power and must acknowledge the impact of this privilege and power in their work with and on behalf of clients. Social workers will also demonstrate cultural humility and sensitivity to the dynamics of power and privilege in all areas of social work.

### **Interpretation**

Cultural competence requires social workers to examine their own cultural backgrounds and identities to increase awareness of personal assumptions, values, stereotypes, and biases. The workers' self-awareness of their own cultural identities is as fundamental to practice as their informed assumptions about clients' cultural backgrounds and experiences. This awareness of personal values, beliefs, stereotypes, and biases informs their practice and influences relationships with clients. Social workers must also be aware of occupying a role of privilege and power by the nature of their professional role and cultural identities and must acknowledge the impact of this privilege and power on oppressed populations. Cultural competence includes knowing and acknowledging how fears, ignorance, and the "isms" (for example, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, homophobia, cissexism, ageism, ableism, xenophobia, classism,

among others) have influenced their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings.

Social workers need to be able to move from being aware of their own cultural heritage to becoming aware of the cultural heritage of others. This cultural awareness enables them to value and celebrate differences in others as well as to demonstrate comfort with cultural differences. Although they strive to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to serve a multicultural clientele, they have an awareness of personal and professional limitations that may warrant the referral of a client to another social worker or organization that can best meet the clients' needs. Self-awareness and self-reflection also helps in understanding the process of cultural identity formation and helps guard against stereotyping. As one develops understanding of the diversity within one's own cultural groups, one can be more open to the diversity within other groups.

The development of cultural competence requires social workers to move from cultural awareness to cultural sensitivity and to evaluate growth and development throughout these different levels of cultural competence in practice.

Self-awareness becomes the basis for professional development and should be supported by professional supervision and organizational administration. Administrators and public policy advocates also need to develop strategies to reduce their own biases and expand their self-awareness.

### **Indicators**

#### **Culturally competent social workers shall**

1. examine and describe their cultural identities, to increase awareness of assumptions, values, beliefs, stereotypes, and biases, and to recognize how these affect services, and influence relationships and interactions with clients.
2. identify how their own knowledge, fears, and "isms" (such as racism, sexism, ethnocentrism,

- heterosexism, homophobia, cissexism, ageism, ableism, xenophobia, and classism) influence their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings
3. develop and apply strategies to inform and change their detrimental attitudes, beliefs, and feelings
  4. demonstrate an awareness of personal or professional limitations that may warrant the referral of a client or organization to another resource that can better meet the client's needs, along with the skills to make such referrals effectively
  5. demonstrate comfort with self- and other-awareness about different cultural customs and views of the world
  6. use relationships with supervisors, mentors, and colleagues to enrich self-awareness and self-reflection
  7. practice cultural humility to balance the dynamics of power and privilege inherent in the social work position and the practitioner's multifaceted cultural identity.

### **Standard 3. Cross-Cultural Knowledge**

Social workers shall possess and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding that is inclusive of, but not limited to, the history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions such as race and ethnicity; immigration and refugee status; tribal groups; religion and spirituality; sexual orientation; gender identity or expression; social class; and mental or physical abilities of various cultural groups.

### **Interpretation**

Culture is a universal phenomenon, and everyone is part of multiple cultures. Cultural education begins with social workers understanding their own roots and cultures, and with such a sense of grounded identity, they can learn and value others. To have a grounded understanding of diversity, awareness of global interdependence is critical, whether the social worker is engaged in social work assessment, intervention, or evaluation. To be effective social work practitioners, educators, policymakers,

administrators, and researchers, there is a need to focus on cultural awareness as well as cross-cultural transactions. Unprecedented movement of people across the globe, globalization of labor, and concerted attention to educational exchanges to prepare practitioners for an interdependent world increases the importance of cultural competence and cross-cultural knowledge (Link & Ramanathan, 2011). This global interdependence is an integral part of the multicultural knowledge base of social workers.

Cultural competence is dynamic and requires frequent learning, unlearning, and relearning about diversity. Social workers need to expand their cultural religious traditions, spiritual belief systems, knowledge, and expertise by expanding their understanding of the following areas: “the impact of culture on behavior, attitudes, and values; the help-seeking behaviors of diverse client groups; the role of language, speech patterns, religious traditions, spiritual belief systems, and communication styles of various client groups in the communities served; the impact of social service policies on various client groups; the resources (agencies, people, informal helping networks, and research) that can be used on behalf of diverse client groups; the ways that professional values may conflict with or accommodate the needs of diverse client groups; and the power relationships in the community, agencies, or institutions and their impact on diverse client groups” (Gallegos, 1982, pp. 7–8).

Cultural competence refers to social workers’ ability to identify their own affiliations to culture and recognize and respect differing traditions of culture in others in ways that influence styles of communication and expressions of respect. Recognition of and respect for others’ cultural traditions implies deep understanding of the intrapersonal layers that are built through cultural heritage and norms of behavior. People in parallel cultures may not share norms, and caution is advised

because the word “normal” could become a trap for judging others (Link & Ramanathan, 2011). Naturally, to have this frame of reference will require that we approach this understanding with cultural humility.

Social workers need to possess specific knowledge about the culture of the providers and client groups with whom they work. This includes, among other considerations, historical experiences, religious traditions, spiritual belief systems, individual and group oppression, adjustment styles, socioeconomic backgrounds, life processes, learning styles, worldviews and specific cultural customs and practices, definitions of and beliefs about wellness and illness or normality and abnormality, and ways of delivering services.

They also must seek specialized knowledge about domestic and global social, cultural, and political systems. Knowledge of how the systems operate and how they serve or fail to serve specific client groups is important. This includes knowledge of institutional barriers that prevent marginalized groups from using services.

Culturally competent social workers need to know the limitations and strengths of current theories, processes, and practice models, and which have specific applicability and relevance to the service needs of culturally, religiously, and spiritually multicultural clientele.

## **Indicators**

### **Culturally competent social workers will**

1. expand their cultural knowledge, expertise, and humility by studying
  - the help-seeking behaviors and pathways of diverse client groups
  - the historical context of marginalized communities
  - the role of language and communication styles of various cultural groups
  - the impact of social policies on

- marginalized groups served
  - the resources such as organizations, people, informal helping networks, and research that can be mobilized on behalf of various cultural groups
2. possess specific knowledge about traditional and nontraditional providers and client groups that they serve, including
    - understanding historical experiences, immigration, resettlement patterns, individual and group oppression, adjustment styles, socioeconomic backgrounds, and life processes
    - learning styles, cognitive skills, worldviews, and specific cultural concerns and practices
    - definitions of and beliefs about service-related concepts such as the causation of wellness and illness, physical and psychological disorders, normality and abnormality, family roles and responsibilities, child rearing practices, birth, marriage, death and dying, and so forth
    - beliefs and practices related to how care and services should be delivered, including diverse approaches to service delivery and alternative healing options
    - factors associated with acculturation and assimilation
  3. demonstrate knowledge of the power relationships in the community and in institutions, and how these affect marginalized groups
  4. possess specific knowledge about U.S., global, social, cultural, and political systems—how they operate and how they serve or fail to serve client groups; include knowledge about institutional, class, cultural, and linguistic barriers to service
  5. identify the limitations and strengths of contemporary theories and practice models and those that have applicability and relevance to their specific client population
  6. recognize the heterogeneity within cultural groups and similarity across cultural groups
  7. describe how people within different groups manifest privilege

8. describe the effects that dominant and nondominant status has on interpersonal relations and group dynamics in the workplace
9. distinguish between intentional and unintentional assertion of privilege related to race, class, and other cultural factors
10. recognize the intersection of “isms” (for example, racism with classism) and their institutionalization
11. acknowledge the ways in which their membership in various social groups influences their worldview and contributes to their own patterns of privileged behavior or internalized oppression
12. understand the interactions of cultural systems of the social worker, client, the service setting, and the community
13. demonstrate cultural humility and empathy toward clients from different cultural groups.

#### **Standard 4. Cross-Cultural Skills**

Social workers will use a broad range of skills (micro, mezzo, and macro) and techniques that demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the importance of culture in practice, policy, and research.

#### **Interpretation**

Practice in an increasingly multicultural and globally interconnected world requires social workers to continuously hone new skills for practice, research, education, administration, and policy development while enhancing the knowledge base that informs their skills. Most specifically, active listening, empathy, and strengths-based interventions are essential in culturally competent practice. In addition, critical thinking and comfort in both asking questions and “not knowing” open communication and build the relationships critical to helping clients and advancing social justice.

Cultural humility is described as a complement to cultural competence (Ortega & Faller, 2011). Cultural humility actively involves multicultural

clientele in the delivery of services, research, and policy making, thereby mitigating the expectation that social workers should know about all cultures. Social workers should demonstrate the ability to work sensitively and effectively at counteracting biases based on their own positions of power and privilege.

Skills in cross-cultural practice include the ability to convey and communicate authenticity, genuineness, empathy, and warmth and to engage culturally relevant community resources. Engaging the client in finding solutions requires the flexibility to consider what is best for the client. Second-language acquisition and expertise are included here as cross-cultural skills.

Furthermore, social workers should demonstrate the ability to critique and assess policies and research for cultural appropriateness, sensitivity, relevance, and inclusiveness, to ensure that outcomes benefit client groups or populations. This includes engaging client groups in the design of policy and research.

More specifically, social workers with cross-cultural skills

- work with people and groups of different cultures, taking responsibility for learning about differences and recognizing the multiple identities that are inherent in understanding people and their cultural contexts
- assess the cultural context for clients and client groups, encouraging open discussion of difference while maintaining a stance of curiosity and openness to learning
- respond skillfully to cultural bias in both themselves and others
- practice interview techniques that appreciate the role of diverse languages and meanings in the client's culture
- demonstrate sensitivity to challenges in the use of interpreters and translated materials

- conduct culturally effective assessments and culturally appropriate intervention plans, collaborating with and empowering clients by soliciting and prioritizing their perspectives and service goals
- select and develop appropriate methods, skills, and techniques that are attuned to their clients' cultural, bicultural, or marginal experiences in their environments
- recognize the verbal and nonverbal communication skills of marginalized clients and groups and respond in culturally empathic ways
- understand the interaction of the cultural systems of the social worker, the client, the particular organizational setting, and the community
- effectively use clients' natural support systems in resolving problems—for example, folk healers, storefronts, religious and spiritual leaders, families of choice, and other community resources
- demonstrate advocacy and empowerment skills in work with clients, recognizing and combating the isms, stereotypes, and myths held by individuals and institutions
- identify service delivery systems or models that are appropriate to the client population of focus and make appropriate referrals when indicated
- consult with supervisors and colleagues for feedback and monitoring of performance and identify features of their own professional skills that impede or enhance their culturally competent practice
- evaluate the validity and applicability of new techniques, research, and knowledge for work with specific client groups.

## Indicators

### Culturally competent social workers will

1. interact with people from a wide range of cultures, religions, and spiritual belief systems and take responsibility for learning what they do not know

2. display proficiency and comfort in discussing cultural difference with colleagues and clients
3. demonstrate skill in conducting a comprehensive assessment of clients in which culturally normative behavior is differentiated from potentially problematic or symptomatic behavior
4. assess cultural strengths and challenges and their impact on individual and group functioning, and integrate this understanding into intervention plans
5. select and develop appropriate methods, skills, and techniques that are attuned to their clients' cultural, bicultural, multicultural, or marginal experiences in their environments
6. adapt and use recognized culturally appropriate models
7. communicate effectively with clients through language acquisition, proper use of interpreters, professionally translated materials, verbal and nonverbal skills, and culturally appropriate protocols
8. advocate for the use of, and work effectively with, interpreters who are both linguistically and culturally competent and prepared to work in the specified service environment
9. demonstrate cultural humility in engagement with all clients and client groups
10. effectively engage clients' natural support systems in resolving problems; for example, work with folk healers, indigenous remedies, religious leaders, friends, family, and other community residents and organizations
11. use empowerment skills in their work with clients
12. identify features of their own professional style that impede or enhance their culturally effective practice and consult with supervisors and colleagues for feedback and monitoring of performance and learning needs
13. conduct supervision and other professional responsibilities with cultural humility and sensitivity to culture, language, and difference
14. convey empathy, curiosity, and a willingness to learn.

## **Standard 5. Service Delivery**

Social workers shall be knowledgeable about and skillful in the use of services, resources, and institutions and be available to serve multicultural communities. They shall be able to make culturally appropriate referrals within both formal and informal networks and shall be cognizant of, and work to address, service gaps affecting specific cultural groups.

### **Interpretation**

Organizations need to support the evaluation of culturally appropriate service delivery models and setting standards for cultural competence. Culturally competent social workers need to be vigilant about the dynamics that result from cultural differences and similarities between workers and clients. This includes monitoring cultural competence among social workers (agency evaluations, supervision, in-service training, and feedback from clients).

Social workers need to detect and prevent exclusion of underserved clients from service opportunities and seek to create opportunities for clients, matching their needs with culturally appropriate service delivery systems or adapting services to better meet the culturally unique needs of clients. Furthermore, they need to foster policies and procedures that help ensure access to care and accommodate varying cultural beliefs.

Direct practitioners, policymakers, and administrators should

- recruit and retain multicultural staff and include cultural competence and cultural humility as requirements in job descriptions and performance and promotion measures
- review the current and emergent demographic trends for the geographic area served by the organization to determine service needs and requirements for interpretation services
- integrate and create (or advocate for the creation of) service delivery systems or

models that are more appropriate to targeted clients who are underserved

- include clients and constituents as major stakeholders in the development of service delivery systems and policy and research agendas
- ensure that program design is reflective of the cultural heritage of clients and families using the service
- attend to social issues (for example, housing, education, policing, and social justice) that concern clients or constituents
- confront staff remarks that demean the culture of clients, constituents, and colleagues
- support the inclusion of cultural competence standards in accreditation, organizational policies, and licensing and certification examinations
- develop staffing plans that reflect target populations served and those populations the agency wishes to serve (for example, hiring, position descriptions, performance evaluations, training)
- develop performance measures to assess culturally competent practice
- engage client groups in the development of research and intervention protocols.

## **Indicators**

### **Culturally competent social workers will**

1. identify the formal and informal resources in the community, describe their strengths and weaknesses, and facilitate referrals as indicated, tailored to the culturally relevant needs of clients and client groups
2. advocate for and promote efforts to create culturally competent services and programs by
  - recruiting multicultural staff and including cultural competence requirements in job descriptions and measures of performance and promotion
  - reviewing current and emergent demographic trends for the geographic area served by the organization to determine needs for the provision of interpretation or other culturally relevant services

- integrating and creating service delivery systems or models that are appropriate to targeted client populations or advocate for the development and implementation of such services
  - including clients as major stakeholders in the selection, decision making, and evaluation of service delivery systems
  - ensuring that program design reflects the culture of clients and families using the service
  - attending to social issues (for example, housing, education, policing, and social justice) that concern clients and constituents of diverse backgrounds
  - using effective strategies for confronting staff remarks that insult or demean clients and their culture
  - supporting the inclusion of cultural competence standards in accreditation bodies and organizational policies as well as in licensing and certification examinations
  - developing staffing plans that reflect the targeted client population (for example, hiring, position descriptions, performance evaluations, training)
  - developing performance measures to assess culturally competent practice
  - supporting participation of client groups in the development of research and intervention protocols
3. building culturally competent organizations through the following policies and practices:
- an administrative mission and purpose that embodies cultural competence and cultural humility in the values, goals, and practices
  - effective recruitment of multilingual and multicultural staff
  - sensitivity to and respect for cultural and religious calendars as they relate to our employees and people served
  - staff composition reflecting the diversity of the client population
  - service planning strategy that includes an assessment/analysis of the client demographics compared with the

demographic trends of the service community

- expanded service capacity to improve the breadth and depth of services to a greater variety of cultural groups
- meaningful inclusion of clients and community members representing relevant cultural groups in decision-making and advisory governance entities, program planning, program evaluation, and research endeavors
- physical surroundings designed and decorated in a manner that is welcoming to the diverse cultural groups served
- engagement in advocacy to improve social issues relevant to targeted client groups
- a work climate that addresses workforce diversity challenges and promotes respect for clients and colleagues of different backgrounds
- advocacy for culturally competent policies and procedures from accrediting, licensing, and certification bodies and contracting agencies
- inclusion of cultural competence and cultural humility in job descriptions, performance evaluations, promotions, and training.

### **Standard 6. Empowerment and Advocacy**

Social workers shall be aware of the impact of social systems, policies, practices, and programs on multicultural client populations, advocating for, with, and on behalf of multicultural clients and client populations whenever appropriate. Social workers should also participate in the development and implementation of policies and practices that empower and advocate for marginalized and oppressed populations.

### **Interpretation**

Culturally competent social workers should be aware of and take action to confront and change the deleterious effects of bias, fears, and isms, including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, homophobia, cissexism, ageism, ableism, xenophobia, classism,

and other forms of oppression on clients' lives. Social advocacy and social action should be directed at empowering marginalized clients and strengthening communities. Social workers should advocate for anti-isms and social justice when colleagues and clients express biases and stereotypes based on culture.

Empowerment has been defined as an intervention, a skill, and a process. Hegar and Hunzeker (1988) and McDermott (1989) described empowerment as an effective intervention with oppressed populations. Pinderhughes (1983) defined empowerment as an individual feeling of increased power and the capacity to influence forces that affect a person. Empowerment refers to enhancing a client's ability to do for himself or herself. Empowerment is closely related to advocacy. When engaging in advocacy, social workers must be careful not to impose their values on clients and must seek to understand what clients mean by advocacy. Respectful collaboration needs to take place to promote mutually agreed-on goals for change.

Social workers need commitment and skill to advocate for and with clients against conscious and unconscious devaluation of cultural experiences related to difference, oppression, power, and privilege domestically and globally. The empowerment tradition in social work practice suggests a promotion of the combined goals of consciousness raising, education, self-awareness, and the development of a sense of personal power and skills while working toward social change. Best practice views this as a process and outcome of the empowerment perspective (Gutiérrez, 1990; Simon, 1994). Social workers using this standard will apply an ecosystems perspective and a strengths orientation in practice and policy development. This means that in describing client needs, workers consider client situations as transitory challenges rather than fixed problems. According to Gutiérrez and Lewis (1999),

empowerment is a model for practice, a perspective, and a set of skills and techniques. Culturally competent social workers reflect these concepts in their practice.

## Indicators

### Culturally competent social workers will

1. advocate for public policies that respect the strengths, cultural values, norms, and behaviors of multicultural groups and communities
2. advocate for policies that address social injustice and institutionalized isms
3. select appropriate strategies to intervene with colleagues, collaborating partners, and institutional representatives, helping them examine their levels of awareness and the consequences of fears and isms, such as exclusionary behaviors or oppressive policies, by
  - assessing dominant group members' level of readiness for feedback and intervention
  - adopting strategies including developing allies, education, dialogue, increased intergroup contact, or social action
  - participating in antidiscriminatory activities and social action to better empower diverse clients and communities at the local, state, and national levels
4. use practice approaches that help clients facilitate a connection with their own power in a manner that is appropriate for their cultural contexts
5. provide support to marginalized cultural groups who are advocating on their own behalf
6. partner, collaborate, and ally with client groups in advocacy efforts
7. work to increase each client group's skills and sense of self-efficacy as social change agents
8. demonstrate intentional effort to ensure that they do not impose their own personal values in practice
9. respect and foster client rights to self-determination.

## **Standard 7. Diverse Workforce**

Social workers shall support and advocate for recruitment, admissions and hiring, and retention efforts in social work programs and organizations to ensure diversity within the profession.

### **Interpretation**

Increasing cultural competence within the profession requires recruitment and retention of a multicultural cadre of social workers, many of whom would bring some “indigenous” cultural competence to the profession as well as demonstrated efforts to increase avenues for the acquisition of culturally competent skills by all social workers. Cultural diversity should be evident within all organizational levels, and not just among direct practitioners.

The social work profession has espoused a commitment to diversity, inclusion, and affirmative action. However, available statistics indicate that in the United States social workers are predominantly white and female (86.0 percent), 8 percent are African American, 3 percent are Latinas, and 3 percent identify as other (NASW, Center for Workforce Studies [CFWS], 2006a); male social workers are 85 percent white, 8 percent African American, 5 percent Latino, and 2 percent other (NASW, CFSW, 2006b).

The proportion of people of color has increased in NASW’s membership over a period of several years: 8.5 percent identify themselves as African American; Hispanics, including Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Hispanic groups, constitute about 4.5 percent of the membership; Asians and Pacific Islanders 1.9 percent; and American Indians/First Nations People 0.5 percent (personal communication with T. Chang, database administrator, NASW, Washington, DC, March 16, 2015).

Major demographic shifts in the U.S. population “will affect the social work workforce, their

clients, agencies, organizations, communities and service delivery systems” (NASW, CFSW, 2011, p. 1). Social work client populations are more diverse than the social work profession itself. In many instances, services to clients are targeted to marginalized communities and special populations, groups that typically include disproportionately high numbers of people of color, older adults, people with disabilities, and clients of lower socioeconomic status.

The discrepancy between the social work labor force racial and ethnic makeup and the changing demographics of the populations they serve guided the profession to respond to the need for social workers to increase cultural competence (Gibelman, 2005; Whitaker, Weismiller, Clark, & Wilson, 2006). To meet this identified need for increased diversity in the workforce, the federal government has taken steps through the funding of education and training programs for health and mental health workers, including social workers from communities of color (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Workforce, National Center for Health Workforce Analysis [HRSA], 2015).

Aligning workforce demographics to client populations can be an effective strategy for bridging cultural differences between social workers and clients, although it cannot be the only strategy. The assumption is that individuals of similar backgrounds can understand each other better and communicate more effectively (Jackson & López, 1999). Yet an equally compelling fact is that “the majority of clinicians from the mainstream dominant culture will routinely provide care for large numbers of patients of diverse ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds. Clearly, increasing the numbers of culturally diverse social workers is not sufficient. Even these professionals will need to be able to provide care for patients who are not like themselves” (Jackson & López, 1999, p. 4). In

addition, culturally competent social workers who bring knowledge or special language skills to the profession, like bicultural or bilingual skills, are entitled to professional equity and should not be exploited for their expertise but should be appropriately compensated for skills that enhance the delivery of services to clients.

## **Indicators**

### **Culturally competent social workers will**

1. advocate for and support human resource policies and procedures that ensure diversity and inclusion within their organization
2. work to achieve a multicultural workforce throughout all levels of the organization that reflects the demographics of both the population served and other potential clientele
3. advocate for and support policies that assure equity and appropriate compensations for social workers who bring special skills or knowledge to the profession, such as bicultural or bilingual skills
4. advocate for and support recruitment and retention and promotion strategies that increase the diversity within the profession through social work programs and schools of social work
5. promote and maintain the expectation that all staff, regardless of cultural membership, continuously engage in the process of improving cultural competency and the capacity to serve a variety of populations.

### **Culturally competent organizations will**

1. develop and implement organizational policies, procedures, and practices that support staff multiculturalism at all levels of the organization
2. develop and implement policies, procedures, and practices that effectively address the dynamics of a multicultural workforce
3. regularly monitor the extent to which their management and staff composition reflect the diversity of the client population and the community
4. review organizational selection and hiring

- policies for inclusion and inadvertent exclusion of the underrepresented, underserved, and oppressed cultural groups and the community
5. regularly monitor and take remedial action as needed to ensure that all client groups can access services and communicate in their preferred language by
    - actively recruiting and seeking to retain multilingual staff who are qualified to perform their work tasks in the indicated language(s)
    - providing “second language” and certification courses and testing to existing staff
    - providing appropriate compensations for social workers who bring special language skill or knowledge to the profession, such as bicultural or bilingual skills
  6. include cultural competence as a requirement for job performance, by including it in job descriptions, performance evaluations, promotions, and training
  7. foster a work climate, through formal and informal means, that addresses workforce diversity challenges and promotes respect for groups, communities, clients, and colleagues of different backgrounds
  8. establish cultural norms of
    - openness and respect for discussion of situations in which insensitive or exclusionary behaviors were experienced
    - intolerance of bias, discrimination, and marginalization within the organization and among colleagues.

### **Standard 8. Professional Education**

Social workers shall advocate for, develop, and participate in professional education and training programs that advance cultural competence within the profession. Social workers should embrace cultural competence as a focus of lifelong learning.

### **Interpretation**

Cultural competence is a vital link between the theoretical and practice knowledge base that defines social work expertise. Social work is a practice-oriented profession, and social work

education and training need to remain current while anticipating future changes in professional practice, which includes the changing needs of multicultural client populations. Diversity and cultural competence need to be addressed in social work curricula and practice, and viewed as relevant to faculty, staff appointments, and research agendas.

The social work profession continues to take steps to ensure that cultural competence is a core component of social work education, training, and practice and to engage in research and scholarship that focus on culturally competent practice among social workers. This includes undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs in social work as well as post-master's training, continuing education, and meetings of the profession. Practice settings should be encouraged to provide in-service training and other continuing education opportunities focused on cultural competence to staff.

In addition, the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics* clearly states, "Social workers who provide supervision and consultation are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries" (p. 14). This highlights the importance of providing culturally sensitive supervision and field instruction, as well as the pivotal role of supervisors and field instructors in promoting culturally competent practice among workers and students.

Educational content for professional practice and licensing should prepare social workers for culturally competent practice across the full spectrum of social work practice roles—direct practice, supervision, administration, policy, education, and research.

## **Indicators**

### **Culturally competent social workers will**

1. include cultural competence content as an ongoing part of their professional development

2. promote professional education that advances cultural competence within the profession
3. advocate for the infusion and integration of cultural competence in social work curricula and research at the BSW, MSW, and PhD levels
4. encourage and conduct research that develops conceptual, theoretical, and practice skills to enhance practice at all levels
5. advocate for professional education on social justice and inclusion
6. educate staff in cross-cultural skills and techniques for resolving conflicts that emerge from differences in communication, customs, values, norms, and behaviors between staff and the clients served.

### **Culturally competent organizations will**

1. provide ongoing training, leadership, and support for improving cultural competence to all employees, including top management, middle management, immediate supervisors, direct staff, and administrative/custodial staff
2. resolve cultural conflicts between staff and the clients served and among employees
3. teach skills to conduct evaluation research to ensure effectiveness in serving and engaging with multicultural client groups
4. determine the demographics of their service area and assess potential service utilization gaps of underserved client groups in the geographic area.

### **Standard 9. Language and Communication**

Social workers shall provide and advocate for effective communication with clients of all cultural groups, including people of limited English proficiency or low literacy skills, people who are blind or have low vision, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and people with disabilities (Goode & Jones, 2009).

### **Interpretation**

Social workers should accept each individual in totality and ensure access to needed services. Language is a source and an extension of personal identity and culture and, therefore, is

one way that individuals interact with others in their families and communities and across different cultural groups. Individuals and groups have a right to use their preferred language.

Linguistic diversity is a resource for society, and as such, should be preserved and promoted. The essence of the social work profession is to promote social justice and eliminate discrimination and oppression based on linguistic or other diversities.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 13166 is titled “Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency.” The Executive Order, signed in August of 2000, “requires Federal agencies to examine the services they provide, identify any need for services to those with limited English proficiency (LEP), and develop and implement a system to provide those services so LEP persons can have meaningful access to them. It is expected that agency plans will provide for such meaningful access consistent with, and without unduly burdening, the fundamental mission of the agency. The Executive Order also requires that the Federal agencies work to ensure that recipients of Federal financial assistance provide meaningful access to their LEP applicants and beneficiaries” (LEP.gov, 2015).

Organizations and social work practitioners who receive federal funds are therefore required to facilitate quality language access at no charge to the consumer. Organizations may neither discriminate nor use methods of administering services that may subject individuals to discrimination. Organizations and social work practitioners are expected to take reasonable steps to provide services and information in appropriate languages, other than English, to ensure that people with LEP are informed and can effectively participate in and benefit from their programs. Similarly, the Americans with

Disabilities Act requires communication accommodation for people with disabilities.

It is the responsibility of both social workers and organizations to provide services in each client's preferred language or to seek the assistance of professional interpreters. Social workers need to communicate respectfully and effectively with clients from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is advantageous if the worker speaks the client's preferred language with the proficiency required for specific interaction one is having (for example, the language skill is different for casual conversation as compared with psychotherapy). Professional interpreters (for example, certified or registered sign language interpreters) should be used. Interpreters should be treated as members of the services provision team and offered orientation and training for the type of setting and services that are being provided (for example, health, legal, mental health, child welfare).

Such orientation and training would include guidelines regarding specialized terms and concepts, confidentiality, interpreter–client relationships, and social work ethics that may reinforce the interpreters' own professional ethics.

Written communication should be provided in the language and at the literacy level appropriate for the intended audience. Priority should be given to legal documents (for example, consent for treatment), informational and educational materials, and public awareness campaigns. Materials should be created in the appropriate language or translated by people with the knowledge and skills relevant to the organizational context, understanding of variations within a language (for example, multiple variations of Spanish based on national origin and region) and literacy level. Literacy level in English is a factor that should be accounted for in the development of any correspondence or written materials (Goode & Jones, 2009).

## Indicators

### Culturally competent social workers will

1. demonstrate an understanding that language is part of the social identity of a person
2. advocate for rights of individuals and groups to receive resources in their preferred language
3. provide and advocate for written and oral information, referrals, and services in the person's preferred language
4. provide jargon-free, easy-to-read material
5. use descriptive and graphic representations (for example, pictures, symbol formats) for individuals with LEP or with limited literacy
6. advocate for the preservation and appreciation of linguistic diversity among clients
7. provide and advocate for reasonable accommodations of clients' linguistic needs, including professional interpreters, professionally translated materials, assistive devices, and alternate communication strategies
8. improve their own ability to speak, read, write, and understand the languages and dialects of their clients without attempting to engage in dialogue that is beyond their own skill level
9. check to ensure accurate communication, realizing that there can be significant variations of word usage and colloquialisms within the same language family based on nationality or region
10. prepare themselves to work effectively with professional interpreters and translators:
  - attend workshops
  - seek consultation from interpretation services
  - become familiar with standards for professional interpretation and translation
  - become familiar with techniques of translation
  - develop or advocate for appropriate organizational policies that support the effective use of standards for professional interpretation and translation
  - support the effective use of and orientation and training for interpreters and translators.

## **Standard 10. Leadership to Advance Cultural Competence**

Social workers shall be change agents who demonstrate the leadership skills to work effectively with multicultural groups in agencies, organizational settings, and communities. Social workers should also demonstrate responsibility for advancing cultural competence within and beyond their organizations, helping to challenge structural and institutional oppression and build and sustain diverse and inclusive institutions and communities.

### **Interpretation**

Leadership has been described as an “activity” (Heifetz, 1994). Social workers should demonstrate responsibility to advance policies and practices related to cultural competence, with and without formal authority. Social workers should aspire to leadership in the service of helping organizations become diverse and inclusive. They should also help these organizations recognize and eradicate policies and practices that reflect structural and institutional oppression.

Social workers shall demonstrate the skill to facilitate difficult conversations that lead to understanding, growth, and organizational strength. They should be able to recognize, within themselves, the ways in which their own positions of power and privilege advance or impede progress relative to cultural competence in their own organizations. In areas such as recruitment, hiring, promotion, team building, and conflict management, social workers should be vigilant about colluding with forces that often reinforce a problematic status quo.

Social workers should lead by example, demonstrating leadership, self-reflection, and advocacy within their own organizations, promoting culturally competent practice at all levels of the organization. Concurrently, they should lead by demonstrating advocacy and

activism to confront community, local, and societal policies and practices that reinforce the marginalization of oppressed populations. Rank and Hutchison (2000) identified, through a survey of social workers, diversity skills including sensitivity to diversity, multicultural leadership, acceptance and tolerance, cultural competence, and tolerance of ambiguity, core skills for successful social work leadership.

Advocating for increasing knowledge development about culturally competent practice with diverse client groups is paramount to social work leadership, as is being a change agent to address injustices with colleagues and peers. The social worker's responsibility is to advance cultural competence and social justice with clients and within organizations, the profession, systems, and society.

Social work leaders will understand cultural humility and the dynamics of privilege, power, and social justice as manifested in their own places of work, taking responsibility to educate others and, ultimately, advance social change within systems, organizations, and society.

### **Indicators**

#### **Culturally competent social work leaders shall**

1. advance and promote culturally competent practice with clients and within organizations, the social work profession, and communities
2. create effective multicultural work teams
3. incorporate and disseminate information on cultural competence in professional activities (for example, committee work, scholarship, research) and in other appropriate arenas
4. work in partnership with marginalized clients and communities to strengthen these communities, encouraging the use of power and facilitating client–community empowerment
5. advocate both within and beyond the profession for fair and equitable treatment of clients and colleagues, especially those from marginalized cultural groups

6. serve in roles in which they can make a difference in advancing multiculturalism inclusion and cultural competence
7. develop the skill and confidence to engage in and facilitate difficult conversations about cultural differences
8. recognize and respect the strengths and differences in professional and personal relationships with others
9. address resistance to the adoption of culturally competent practice
10. engage colleagues in the identification and implementation of strategies that strengthen and sustain inclusive multicultural organizations
11. mobilize colleagues, clients, and organizations to address injustice, bias, and isms on all levels
12. advocate for multicultural membership on state regulatory and licensing boards for the social work profession.

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