Best Practice Standards in

Social Work
Supervision

About the Associations

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the world. NASW's membership is over 145,000 social workers from 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, Puerto Rico, and U.S. social workers practicing abroad. The mission of NASW is to enhance the professional growth and development of its members, create and maintain professional standards, and advance sound social policies.

The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) is the association of jurisdictional boards that regulate social work. Membership in ASWB includes 49 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and ten Canadian provinces. The mission of ASWB is to strengthen protection of the public by providing support and services to the social work regulatory community to advance competent and ethical practices.

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Contents

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) have developed *Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision* (hereafter "Supervision Standards") to support and strengthen supervision for professional social workers. The standards provide a general framework that promotes uniformity and serves as a resource for issues related to supervision in the social work supervisory community.

The knowledge base of the social work profession has expanded, and the population it serves has become more complex. Therefore, it is important to the profession to have assurance that all social workers are equipped with the necessary skills to deliver competent and ethical social work services. Equally important to the profession is the responsibility to protect clients.

The NASW and ASWB Task Force on Supervision Standards maintain that supervision is an essential and integral part of the training and continuing education required for the skillful development of professional social workers. Supervision protects clients, supports practitioners, and ensures that professional standards and quality services are delivered by competent social workers.

The NASW *Code of Ethics* and the *ASWB Model Social Work Practice Act* serve as foundation documents in the development of the supervision standards. These standards support the practice of social workers in various work settings and articulate the importance of a collective professional understanding of supervision within the social work community.

Overview of Supervision

There are numerous definitions of supervision. For the purposes of these supervision standards, professional supervision is defined as the relationship between supervisor and supervisee in which the responsibility and accountability for the development of competence, demeanor, and ethical practice take place. The supervisor is responsible for providing direction to the supervisee, who applies social work theory, standardized knowledge, skills, competency, and applicable ethical content in the practice setting. The supervisor and the supervisee both share responsibility for carrying out their role in this collaborative process.

Supervision encompasses several interrelated functions and responsibilities. Each of these interrelated functions contributes to a larger responsibility or outcome that ensures clients are protected and that clients receive competent and ethical services from professional social workers. During supervision, services received by the client are evaluated and adjusted, as needed, to increase the benefit to the client. It is the supervisor's responsibility to ensure that the supervisee provides competent, appropriate, and ethical services to the client.

There are many models of supervision described in the literature, ranging from traditional, authoritarian models to more collaborative models. Different models of supervision place emphasis, in varying degrees, on the client, the supervisor, the supervisee, or the context in which the supervision takes place. Ideally, the supervisor and the supervisee use a collaborative process when a supervision model is selected;

however, it is ultimately the responsibility of the supervisor to select the model that works best for the professional development of the supervisee.

The supervisory relationship is built on trust, confidentiality, support, and empathic experiences. Other qualities inherent in the supervisory relationship include constructive feedback, safety, respect, and self-care.

The standards for social work supervision should be used in conjunction with professional judgment and should not be the exclusive basis on which a decision is made. Supervisors should always familiarize themselves with the supervisory requirements of regulatory and accreditation bodies that control their particular geographic area, work setting, or both.

Supervision ensures that supervisees obtain advanced knowledge so that their skills and abilities can be applied to client populations in an ethical and competent manner. Some areas of knowledge, and the application of that knowledge to clients, can only be translated during the supervisory process. Supervision provides guidance and enhances the quality of work for both the supervisor and the supervisee and, ultimately, the client.

The activities of supervision are captured by three primary domains that may overlap: administrative, educational, and supportive.

Administrative
Administrative supervision is synonymous with management. It is the implementation of administrative methods that enable social workers to provide effective services to clients.

Administrative supervision is oriented toward agency policy or organizational demands and focuses on a supervisee's level of functioning on the job and work assignment.

Educational

Educational supervision focuses on professional concerns and relates to specific cases. It helps supervisees better understand social work philosophy, become more self-aware, and refine their knowledge and skills. Educational supervision focuses on staff development and the training needs of a social worker to a particular caseload. It includes activities in which the supervisee is guided to learn about assessment, treatment and intervention, identification and resolution of ethical issues, and evaluation and termination of services.

Supportive

Supportive supervision decreases job stress that interferes with work performance and provides the supervisee with nurturing conditions that compliment their success and encourage self-efficacy.

Supervisees are faced with increasing challenges that contribute to job stress, including the growing complexity of client problems, unfavorable physical work environments, heavy workloads, and emotionally draining environments such as vicarious trauma. Supportive supervision is underscored by a climate of safety and trust, where supervisees can develop their sense of professional identity.

The combination of educational, administrative, and supportive supervision is necessary for the development of competent, ethical, and professional social workers.

Qualifications

The qualifications for an approved social work supervisor are specified in the licensing statutes and regulatory standards of each jurisdiction, and may include specifications for each level of social work practice or be universal, with one set of qualifications for all practice levels. The general qualifications for supervision may include the following:

- a current license to practice at the specific level or above the level in which the supervision will be provided, and in the jurisdiction in which both the supervisor and the supervisee are practicing
- a degree from an accredited school of social work
- specified coursework in supervision, a minimum number of continuing education hours in supervisory practice as required by the jurisdiction, or both
- a minimum of three years (or more if required in licensing statutes) of post licensure practice experience
- continuing education hours as required for maintenance of supervisory credentials in the practice jurisdiction
- being free from sanction of the licensing board for violation(s) of practice standards.

In addition, social work supervisors should have experience and expertise in the practice arena and with the population of the supervisees' practice, such as addictions, children and adolescents, mental health, and community organization. Supervisors should have competencies in the theories and various modalities of treatment and maintain currency

through the use of professional journals and
continuing education.

Effective supervision requires knowledge of the
principles of supervision and the ability to
demonstrate necessary skills such as addressing
both strengths and challenges of the supervisee,
modeling and discussing ethical practice, and
providing support and encouragement in the
learning context. Supervisors should be familiar
with the administrative and organizational
structure of the agency or practice domain of
the supervisee.

Standard 1. Context in Supervision

General contextual matters important to the
supervision process include the following:

Understanding Scope of Practice
Supervision may be provided to address a variety
of issues. Among the most common is supervision
for obtaining an advanced practice license,
particularly a clinical license. Supervision may
also be provided to new or recent graduates,
focusing on the practical aspects of helping
clients. It may also include social workers who
have been sanctioned following disciplinary
action and those learning a new practice or skill.
Supervisors must be sure they meet the
qualifications to become a supervisor and have a
clear understanding of the skills and knowledge
that the supervisory relationship is designed to
help the supervisee develop.

Communities of Practice
Many social workers practice within the
community in which they live and may have

"insider" knowledge about community issues that may assist in building a therapeutic alliance, identifying appropriate referrals, or simply understanding clients' concerns. Being an insider may also result in dual or multiple relationships. Social work supervisors may address these issues by establishing parameters to the supervisory relationship, with attention to boundaries and self-monitoring. In all cases, supervisors must ensure that the professional relationship is paramount and protected.

Interdisciplinary Supervision

With the increasing focus on interdisciplinary practice in recent years, social workers may be supervised by a professional of a different discipline. Although this may be appropriate within the team or unit context, social workers should seek supervision or consultation from another social worker with regard to specific social work practices and issues. Similarly, a social worker providing supervision to a member of another discipline should refer that supervisee to a member of her or his own profession for practice-specific supervision or consultation.

Cultural Awareness and Cross-cultural Supervision

Social work supervisors should adhere to the *NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* and have specialized knowledge and understanding about the culture of the client population served by the supervisee. Supervisors should be able to communicate information about diverse client groups to supervisees and help them to use appropriate methodological approaches, skills, and techniques that reflect their understanding of the role of culture in the helping process.

The supervisor who is supervising a social worker with a different cultural background should develop knowledge about that culture as it relates to social work practice. Primary sources of information may include the supervisee or other practitioners familiar with the supervisee's cultural community.

Dual Supervision and Conflict Resolution
In circumstances in which a supervisee is being administratively or clinically supervised simultaneously by more than one person, it is best practice to have a contractual agreement or memorandum of understanding delineating the role of each supervisor, including parameters of the relationships, information sharing, priorities, and how conflicts will be resolved. If no agreement exists, the immediate employment supervisor may have the final say.

Standard 2. Conduct of Supervision

The underlying agreement between supervisors and supervisees includes the premise that supervisees depend on the skills and expertise of supervisors to guide them. Respect for the different roles that supervisors and supervisees play in the supervisory relationship is a key factor in successful supervision.

To maintain objectivity in supervision, it is important to

- negotiate a supervision contract with mutually agreeable goals, responsibilities, and time frames
- provide regular feedback to supervisees on their progress toward these goals

- establish a method for resolving communication and other problems in the supervision sessions so that they can be addressed
- identify feelings supervisees have about their clients that can interfere with or limit the process of professional services.

Confidentiality

Supervisors must ensure that all client information be kept private and confidential except when disclosure is mandated by law. Supervisees should inform clients during the initial interview that their personal information is being shared in a supervisory relationship. Supervisors also have an obligation to protect and keep the supervisory process confidential and only release information as required by the regulatory board to obtain licensure or if necessary, for disciplinary purposes.

Contracting for Supervision

In situations in which an agency may not have a clinical supervisor who meets the qualifications of a supervisor as required by the regulatory board, a social work supervisee may contract for supervision services outside the agency to qualify for a clinical license. Supervisees should contact the regulatory board in their jurisdictions in advance of contracting to confirm whether such a practice is permitted and confirm the documentation required from the supervisor. The time frame required for the supervision period should also be confirmed.

Contracting for outside supervision can be problematic and may place a supervisor at risk. If the supervisee is paying for the services, he or she can dismiss the supervisor, especially if disagreements or conflicts arise. The supervisee

can also blame the supervisor if there is failure in the licensing process. In addition, the supervisor may encounter case management conflicts between the supervisee and the agency.

Development of a contractual agreement among the social worker, the supervisor, and the employing agency is essential in preventing problems in the supervisory relationship. The agreement should clearly delineate the agency's authority and grant permission for the supervisor to provide clinical supervision. Evaluation responsibilities, periodic written reports, and issues of confidentiality should also to be included in the agreement.

Supervisors and supervisees should also sign a written contract that outlines the parameters of the supervisory relationship. Frequent written progress reports prepared by the supervisor should be required and, if appropriate, meet the ongoing standards established by jurisdictions and agency requirements.

Leadership and Role Model
Supervisors play a key role in the professional development of their supervisees. The actions and advice of the supervisor are keenly observed by supervisees, and consequently, influence much of the supervisee's thinking and behavior. Teaching is an important function of the supervisor, who models the behavior the supervisee will emulate. Supervisors should create a learning environment in which supervisees learn about the internal and external environments in which they work as well as the environments in which their clients find themselves each day.

Competency

Social work supervisors should be competent and participate in ongoing continuing education and certification programs in supervision. Supervisors should be aware of growth and development in social work practice and be able to implement evidence-based practice into the supervisory process. Supervisors should also be aware of their limitations and operate within the scope of their competence. When specialty practice areas are unfamiliar, supervisors should obtain assistance or refer supervisees to an appropriate source for consultation in the desired area.

Supervisory Signing Off

Supervisors should submit reimbursement claims only for services that they performed. "Signing off" on services performed by a supervisee who is ineligible to seek reimbursement is fraudulent. Supervisors and supervisees should be aware of the statutes and regulations addressing this matter in their jurisdictions.

Self-Care

It is crucial for supervisors to pay attention to signs of job stress and address them with their supervisees and themselves. Supervisors should provide resources to help supervisees demonstrating symptoms of job stress and make outside referrals as necessary. Peer consultation can be helpful to supervisors and supervisees in such cases.

Social work supervisors share responsibilities for the services provided to clients. Liability of supervisors has been determined by the courts and includes direct liability related to negligent or inadequate supervision and vicarious liability related to negligent conduct by supervisees. Supervisors and supervisees should both have professional liability insurance.

In an agency setting, a supervisor's potential liability is affected by his or her level of responsibility and authority. Supervisors should familiarize themselves with the scope of their responsibility and authority, which may be specified in an agency written policy manual, the supervisor's job description, or a written contractual agreement.

The requirements and expectations of a supervisor's position also may affect liability, especially in situations in which the supervisor may have competing demands and is unable to adequately perform his or her supervisory functions. Such situations may present legal challenges.

Liability

Direct liability may be charged against a supervisor when inappropriate recommendations carried out by a supervisee are to a client's detriment. Direct liability can also be charged when a supervisor assigns duties to a supervisee who is inadequately prepared to perform them.

Social work supervisors should be proactive in preventing boundary violations that should be discussed at the beginning of the supervisory

relationship. A supervisor should not supervise family members, current or former partners, close friends, or any person with whom the supervisor has had a therapeutic or familial relationship. In addition, a supervisor should not engage in a therapeutic relationship with a supervisee.

Vicarious liability involves incorrect acts or omissions committed by the supervisee that can also be attributed to the supervisor. Supervisees can be held to the same standard of care and skill as that of their supervisors and are expected to abide by the statutes and regulations in their jurisdictions.

For purposes of risk management, supervisors should

- ensure that the services provided to clients by supervisees meet or exceed standards or practice
- maintain documentation of supervision
- monitor supervisee's professional work activities
- identify actions that might pose a danger to the health and/or welfare of the supervisees' clients and take prompt and appropriate remedial measures
- identify and address any condition that may impair a supervisee's ability to practice social work with reasonable skill, judgment, and safety.

Regulations
The statutes and regulations for the qualifications of supervisors and licensing requirements for supervisees may vary by jurisdiction. An increasing number of jurisdictions are requesting supervision contracts and plans prior to the commencement of supervision. It is the responsibility of supervisors and supervisees to familiarize themselves with the specific

requirements in their jurisdictions for the qualifications for supervision, licensure, supervision contracts and plans, and other requirements. Many social work regulations require all supervision for purposes of licensure to be provided by a licensed clinical social worker.

Documentation

Documentation is an important legal tool that verifies the provision of services. Supervisors should assist supervisees in learning how to properly document client services performed, regularly review their documentation, and hold them to high standards.

Each supervisory session should be documented separately by the supervisor and the supervisee. Documentation for supervised sessions should be provided to the supervisee within a reasonable time after each session. Social work regulatory boards may request some form of supervision documentation when supervisees apply for licensure. Records should be safeguarded and kept confidential.

Where appropriate, supervisors should train supervisees to document for reimbursement and claims submission.

Other Legal Concerns

The experienced social worker developing skills in a new specialty area may receive supervision limited to the new area of practice. A supervisor is selected on the basis of his or her expertise in the specialty area. Having a supervision contract or plan detailing the obligations of both parties may be helpful.

Supervision may be required following disciplinary action. In such situations, an agreement between the supervisor, supervisee, and other authority should be developed to address such items as corrective issues to be covered in supervision, information sharing between the parties, and frequency of supervision.

Social work supervisors may retain a consultant for case consultation and review as necessary, especially when conflicts arise.

Standard 4. Ethical Issues

Social work supervisors and supervisees may face ethical dilemmas when providing services to clients. To address those dilemmas, the supervisor and the supervisee should have a thorough knowledge of the code of ethics under which they practice. The NASW *Code of Ethics* serves as a guide to assist supervisors in working with ethical issues that arise in supervisory relationships. The following precepts from the NASW *Code of Ethics* are incorporated throughout these standards.

- 3.01(a) "Social workers who provide supervision or consultation should have the necessary knowledge and skill to supervise or consult appropriately and should do so only within their areas of knowledge and competence" (p. 19).
- 3.0l (b) "Social workers who provide supervision or consultation are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries" (p. 19).
- 3.01(c) "Social workers should not engage in any dual or multiple relationships with

supervisees in which there is a risk of
exploitation of or potential harm to the
supervisee" (p. 19).

- 3.01(d) "Social workers who provide
supervision should evaluate supervisee'
performance in a manner that is fair and
respectful" (p. 19).

Supervisors have the responsibility to address
any confusion that supervisees may encounter as
a result of ethical demands. A supervisor should
be aware of the differences between professional
ethics, core values, and personal moral beliefs
and help the supervisee to distinguish these
elements when making practice decisions.
Supervisors can use the supervisory relationship
as a training ground for ethical discretion,
analysis, and decision-making.

Ethical Decision-Making
Supervisors help supervisees learn ethical
decision-making, a process that is both cognitive
and emotional. Supervisors should discuss and
model the process of identifying and exploring
problems, looking at issues, values, principles,
and regulations. Supervisors and their
supervisees should discuss possible
consequences, as well as costs and benefits, of
certain actions. They should explore what
actions best achieve fairness, justice, and respect
for others, make a decision about actions to be
taken, and evaluate them after implementation.
When a supervisee makes an ethical mistake, he
or she, with the assistance of the supervisor,
should try to ameliorate any damage and learn
how to avoid that mistake in the future. If
appropriate or required by the jurisdiction, the
violation may have to be reported to the
licensing board.

Boundaries

The supervisory relationship is an excellent forum for supervisees to learn about boundaries with clients. Ethical issues related directly to supervision include the nature of the professional responsibility to the supervisee, appropriate boundaries, and responsibilities when dealing with incompetent or unethical behavior.

Becoming involved in a romantic or familial relationship with a supervisee is an ethical violation and should be strictly avoided because it creates marked role conflict that can fatally undermine the supervisory relationship.

If the supervisor recognizes a potential boundary issue with a supervisee, he or she should acknowledge it, assess how the boundary issue has affected supervision, and resolve the conflict.

Although the supervisory relationship is between professionals, supervisors usually have more power in the relationship than supervisees. To avoid boundary problems and conflicts of interest with a supervisee, the ethical supervisor must accept his or her power and be comfortable in using that authority to ensure accountability and protect clients.

Other ethical considerations include the following:

- A supervisor should always focus on the goals of supervision and the nature of the supervisory relationship and avoid providing psychotherapy services to the supervisee.
- Supervisors working with more than one supervisee should see each supervisee as an individual and adapt to that supervisee's

needs. At the same time, supervisors must be fair and consistent when providing supervision to multiple supervisees.

Self-disclosure

Supervisors should be discreet in sharing personal information and not allow it to become the focus of supervision. When personal information is disclosed, it should be brief and support the goals of supervision. Supervisors should explain their comments and rationale to help supervisees gain understanding of appropriate techniques to use in the interview process with clients.

Attending to Safety

Supervisors make supervisees aware of safety issues and train them how to respond to workplace conflict, respond to threats and harassment, protect property, and deal with assaults and their emotional aftermath. Supervisors help supervisees plan for safety in the office and in the community by learning non-violent response strategies and appropriate ways to respond to crises.

Alternative Practice

The social work supervisor should decide whether an alternative practice, a non-traditional social work intervention, is the best modality of treatment for a supervisee to use with a client.

When a supervisee uses an alternative practice, the supervisor should have expertise of that practice and ensure that the supervisee has the prerequisite training and knowledge to perform the alternative practice. In situations in which the supervisor does not have the skills to provide the alternative practice, it may be necessary to

involve a second supervisor. In such cases, the two supervisors should work closely together to avoid conflicts and ensure effective use of the alternative practice for the client.

Standard 5. Technology

The rapid growth and advances in technology present many opportunities and challenges in a supervisory relationship. When using or providing supervision by technological means, supervisors and supervisees should follow standards applied to a face-to-face supervisory relationship. Supervisors should demonstrate competency in the use of technology for supervision purposes and keep abreast of emerging technologies. Supervisors should be aware of the risks and benefits of using technology in social work practice and implement them in the learning process for supervisees. All applicable federal, provincial, and state laws should be adhered to, including privacy and security rules that may address patient rights, confidentiality, allowable disclosure, and documentation and include requirements regarding data protection, encryption, firewalls, and password protection.

When supervision is being provided for licensure purposes, supervisors and supervisees have the responsibility to familiarize themselves with specific definitions and requirements by social work regulatory boards for the use of technology in practice. For successful communication, compatible equipment, software, and other infrastructure are required by both parties.

Distance Supervision

The use of technology for supervision purposes is gradually increasing. Video-conferencing is a growing technological tool used to provide supervision, especially in remote areas. Some jurisdictions allow electronic means for supervision; others may limit the amount of supervision that can be provided from a distance. When using technology to provide distance supervision, one must be aware of standards of best practice for providing this tool and be knowledgeable of the statutes and regulations governing the provision of such services.

Risk Management

Using technology in social work practice presents many risks. Supervisors should ensure a learning process that emphasizes a standard of care consistent with the NASW *Code of Ethics*, *NASW and ASWB Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice*, Canadian Social Workers *Code of Ethics*, licensing laws, applicable organization policies and procedures, and regulations for businesses. Doing so ensures high-quality services; protects the supervisor, supervisee, and client; and safeguards against malpractice issues.

Evaluation and Outcomes

The evaluation and outcome of the supervisory process is an integral part to the development of professional social workers. The evaluation of the supervisee, as well as the evaluation of the impact and outcome of supervision, is a significant responsibility of the supervisor.

An evaluation serves many purposes, which vary depending on the setting and context. An evaluation can be used to determine whether a supervisee is able to practice social work with increasing independence in a competent and ethical manner. An evaluation can also be used for licensure or credentialing reasons, annual job performance, probation, promotion, or merit salary increases. Social work supervisors have the responsibility of evaluating the performance of supervisees in a fair manner with clearly stated criteria.

All evaluations have several common elements. The first element is a formal agreement between the supervisor and the supervisee regarding expectations for the outcome of the evaluative process. At the beginning of each supervisory relationship, the supervisor, in collaboration with the supervisee, should prepare written, measurable goals and specific guidelines to evaluate the supervisee's performance. In addition, the evaluation should include a time frame for goal attainment and a systematic procedure for disengaging from supervision once the goal has been reached.

Tools used to measure supervision goals can be a combination of various pre-determined criteria including: case studies, progress notes, conversations, the successful implementation of treatment plans, and client outcomes.

To enhance learning and increase the effectiveness of supervision, a systematic procedure for ongoing supervisory feedback is necessary. Feedback during the supervisory process is planned and continuous and in written and verbal form. Planned supervisory

feedback allows both the supervisor and the supervisee to make modifications, if needed, to improve professional practice and skill development. Continuous feedback also helps to determine the impact and effectiveness of the received supervision. When using an evaluation as a learning process, clinical and administrative errors can be expected and do occur but should not be used in a punitive manner.

The final stage of an evaluative process should include a discussion of future challenges that the supervisee may encounter and the resources that the supervisee can use to resolve those challenges. The goals of an evaluation process are to improve the delivery of services to clients, maintain ethical and competent social work practice, and protect the public. Structuring an evaluation process focused on the supervisory learning experience and the identification of future learning needs is an important part of the supervisory process. Supervisors have the responsibility of researching and selecting the best evaluative tool for supervision.

For purposes of licensing and credentialing, a supervisory evaluation is an aid to public protection. The supervisor is the last gate to competent, independent clinical practice and one of the best resources regarding a supervisee's fitness to practice social work. The supervisor has the responsibility of identifying incompetent or unethical practice and taking appropriate steps to properly address the errors of the supervisee.

Terminating the Supervisory Relationship

Ending the supervisory relationship is just as important as beginning it and a supervisor should devote attention to it. Termination occurs when the supervisor or supervisee leaves the organization or is promoted or when the supervisee obtains licensure. It may also occur when the goals are achieved in the agreement between the supervisor and supervisee.

It is important for supervisors to identify early on the dynamics of termination as they emerge and assist supervisees in learning specific skills to deal with termination. Helping supervisees to address their concerns about termination can help make termination a good experience. All documentation by the supervisor should be completed by the time of termination. It is unprofessional and possibly unethical to withhold status or final reports, particularly where such reports are required for licensing documentation.

Two germane areas of work require attention: (1) termination of the supervisory relationship and (2) termination of the supervisee-client relationship. When the supervisor is leaving, if appropriate, a smooth transition to a new supervisor should be arranged. The skills used in ending a supervisory relationship can also be used with clients. A supervisor models for the supervisee the skills required to terminate with clients and addresses concerns that he or she may have about termination. Supervisory focus on the termination phase helps to ensure a quality and safe termination of the supervisee-client relationship and makes for a positive supervisory-supervisee transition.

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