

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

NASW Standards for
Social Work Practice in

Child
Welfare

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Background of Standards for Child Welfare

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) led the field in the development of best practices for social workers in child welfare. The *NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Protection* (1981) served as an initial effort to formulate standards in this important and continually evolving area of practice. Because it is essential that standards reflect and promote sound social work practice across the full array of child welfare services, they were revised and expanded to address changing practices and polices beyond child protection. NASW periodically revises the *NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Welfare* to meet the current practice trends and to reflect the values of the profession. These standards can be regarded as a basic tool for social work practice in child welfare, which may include prevention, parenting programs, family support programs, family-based services, family foster care, kinship care, residential group homes, adoption, and independent living. Since the *NASW Child Protection Standards* were initially published, there have been many profound practice and policy changes in the child welfare field. Child welfare systems are complex, and child welfare as a specialized field of practice is affected by and contributes to evolutions in policy, research, and practice models (NASW, 2005).

Introduction

Child welfare systems across the country serve some of the most vulnerable children, youths, and families. These systems are designed to

support families and to protect children from harm through an array of prevention and intervention services; in particular, they are designed to support children who have been or are at risk of abuse or neglect. Historically, social workers have played critical roles in these systems (NASW, 2005). Studies indicate that social work degrees are the most appropriate degrees for this field of practice (Child Welfare League of America, 2002) and have been directly linked to better outcomes for children and families and retention of staff (Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining & Lane, 2005).

Social workers practicing in the child welfare field often face the need to make critical decisions while working in stressful work environments that can include high case loads and limited supervision, training, and supports. High caseloads and workloads are also contributing factors to staff turnover (American Public Human Services Association, 2005; Torrico Meruvia, 2010). Other stressful work conditions such as inadequate salaries, administrative burdens, and fear of violence also influence the recruitment and retention of qualified staff (Torrico Meruvia, 2010; Whitaker, Reich, Brice Reid, Williams, & Woodside, 2004). Increasingly, child welfare workers also face legal challenges when intervening to protect children (*Camreta v. Greene*, 2011; *Franet v. County of Alameda*, 2008; *Southerland v. City of New York*, 2012).

Economic, social, and political factors significantly affect the child welfare system and the number of children and youths needing and receiving child welfare services. These factors challenge

current policies and practice approaches and place greater demands on the child welfare system to respond to the needs of children and youths who are at risk and their families.

Although child welfare is designed to protect children from harm, ensure their well-being, help them to achieve permanency, and strengthen families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012), child welfare systems cannot be expected to bear the sole responsibility for a child's well-being. An increasing number of communities are engaged in partnerships and collaborations with child welfare agencies focused on preventing child abuse and neglect and other public and private agencies committed to providing family support services. Work across disciplines is critical to promoting children's well-being—teachers, community and faith leaders, medical professionals, police officers, juvenile probation officers, and child welfare workers are among the professionals who can work together to keep children and youths safe.

Across the country, child welfare systems also include a combination of public and private agency providers. The roles, priorities, and practices of child welfare will continue to change as we look to the future. To better serve vulnerable children, youths, and their families, we need to continue to build bridges across child welfare and other systems.

Goals of the Standards

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

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

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

state, and federal levels to support the well-being of children and youths and to engage in program evaluation and research aimed to enhance practice.

Definitions

Advocacy

Advocacy is the act of supporting the rights of individuals or communities through interventions or empowerment (Barker, 2003).

Caseload

A caseload comprises the individuals—including children, youths, and families—for whom the social worker is responsible.

Child welfare services

Child welfare systems include a range of services (for example, family-based services, child protection, out-of-home placements, adoption services), encompassing prevention, intervention, and treatment. Services are intended to protect children and their well-being, strengthen families, and provide permanency when children cannot safely remain with their families. Child welfare services should be strength based; family centered; trauma informed; and respectful of a family's culture, values, customs, beliefs, and needs (Child Welfare League of America, 2005).

Collaboration

Collaboration is the process by which individuals and organizations work together toward a common purpose.

Culture

Culture refers to “the customs, habits, skills, technology, arts, values, ideology, science, and religious and political behavior of a group of people in a specific time period” (Barker, 2003, p. 105). Culture includes ways in which individuals with disabilities or individuals of various races, ethnicities, and religious and sexual orientations experience the world around them.

Cultural competence

Cultural competence is “the ability of individuals and systems to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and faiths or religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, tribes, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each. Cultural competence is a vehicle used to broaden our knowledge and understanding of individuals and communities through a continuous process of learning about the cultural strengths of others and integrating their unique abilities and perspectives into our lives” (Child Welfare League of America, n.d.).

Evidence-based practice

Evidence-based practice is “the use of the best available scientific knowledge derived from randomized controlled outcome studies and meta-analyses of existing outcome studies, as one basis for guiding professional interventions and effective therapies, combined with professional ethical standards, clinical judgment, and practice wisdom” (Barker, 2003, p. 149).

Out-of-home care

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

Permanency planning

Permanency planning is a process that intends to limit placement into and time spent in out-of-home care. “Planned and systematic efforts are made to ensure that children are in safe and nurturing relationships expected to last a lifetime” (Child Welfare League of America, n.d.).

Social worker

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

Youth development

“Youth development is an ongoing process in which young people are engaged in meeting their basic needs and developing the skills and competencies needed to become contributing members of society” (Child Welfare League of America, 2005, p. 2).

Note: The terms “social worker” and “social worker in child welfare” are used interchangeably throughout this document.

Standard 1. Ethics and Values

Social workers in child welfare shall demonstrate a commitment to the values and ethics of the social work profession and shall use NASW's *Code of Ethics* as a guide to ethical decision making while understanding the unique aspects of child welfare practice.

Interpretation

A social worker in child welfare shall demonstrate the core values of service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of relationships, integrity, and competence. In addition, social workers shall adhere to the professional ethical responsibilities delineated in the NASW *Code of Ethics*.

The *Code of Ethics* establishes the ethical responsibilities of all social workers with respect to themselves, clients, colleagues, employees and employing organizations, the social work profession, and society. Acceptance of these responsibilities guides and fosters competent social work practice in child welfare.

As an integral component of the child welfare system, social workers have the responsibility to know and comply with local, state, and federal legislations, regulations, and policies. In some instances, legal and regulatory guidelines and administrative practices may conflict with the best interests of a child and/or family. In the event that conflicts arise among competing expectations, child welfare social workers are directed to the NASW *Code of Ethics* as a tool in their decision making. However, they should also seek guidance from supervisors and/or other relevant professionals.

Standard 2. Qualifications, Knowledge, and Practice Requirements

Social workers practicing in child welfare shall hold a BSW or MSW degree from an accredited school of social work. All social workers in child welfare shall demonstrate a working knowledge of current theory and practice in child welfare and general knowledge of state and federal child welfare laws.

Interpretation

Although hiring requirements for social workers in child welfare vary across the country, the knowledge requirements considered fundamental to all social work practice, which are met by completion of BSW and MSW programs within colleges and universities and accredited by CSWE, must include knowledge about the history and development of social work, including child welfare. Social workers in child welfare shall also possess working knowledge related to child and adult development, impact of trauma, parenting and family dynamics, and community systems where the child and family reside. In addition, social workers in child welfare shall have a proven ability to apply this knowledge to appropriately intervene in family, organizational, and social systems. These interventions should help to address the needs of children and families. Interventions should also aim to prevent harm to the child and maximize the family's chances for positive functioning and stability.

Social workers practicing in child welfare shall also stay up to date on current practice models and new laws and regulations that can affect child welfare practice. Child welfare agencies should ensure that information regarding new

laws and federal regulations are disseminated and explained to staff in a timely manner.

Social workers in child welfare shall seek the advice and counsel of colleagues whenever such consultation is in the best interests of clients. Consultation should include counsel and guidance from supervisors, other social workers, and other disciplines with relevant expertise. However, “social workers should protect the confidentiality of all information obtained in the course of professional service, except for compelling professional reasons” (NASW, 2008, p. 10). Social workers shall disclose confidential information when appropriate and with written consent from the client (NASW, 2008).

Standard 3. Professional Development

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

Interpretation

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

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

Standard 4. Advocacy

Social workers in child welfare shall seek to advocate for resources and system reforms that will improve services for children, youths, and families.

Interpretation

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

Standard 5. Collaboration

Social workers in child welfare shall promote interdisciplinary and interorganizational collaboration to support, enhance, and deliver effective services to children, youths, and families.

Interpretation

Multiple service providers often serve children, youths, and families involved with child welfare. Social workers shall understand the roles and goals of other professionals and work toward more effective collaborations and understanding.

Such collaborations can include multidisciplinary teams; community leaders; and other service providers in the fields of law, juvenile justice, medicine, public health, housing, education, and behavioral health. Collaborations can ensure that children, youths, and families access needed services without duplication.

Standard 6. Record Keeping and Confidentiality of Client Information

Social workers in child welfare shall maintain the appropriate safeguards for the privacy and confidentiality of client information.

Interpretation

Social workers in child welfare shall protect client information at all times. Access to client information (paper and electronic) must be maintained securely. Records shall be maintained according to federal, state, and local laws and mandates. Social workers shall keep and complete quality case records in a timely and professional manner. Social workers in child welfare shall also conform to NASW's *Code of Ethics*.

Information obtained by the social worker from or about the client shall be viewed as private and confidential unless the client gives informed consent for the social worker to release or discuss the information with another party. There may also be other exceptions to confidentiality, as required by law or professional ethics. Social workers shall be familiar with national, state, and local exceptions to confidentiality, such as mandates to report when the client is a danger to self or others and for reporting child abuse and neglect. Clients should be informed of the agency's confidentiality requirements and limitations before services are initiated.

Social workers shall use available technology in a professionally appropriate manner to increase the efficiency of services in a way that ensures the protection of clients' rights and privacy.

Technology can help social workers in child welfare manage workloads, reduce duplication of services, and increase timely service delivery. The Internet, e-mail, electronic case record systems, and data analysis software have increased the efficiency of child welfare services. The Internet has become a place for organizations to educate the public and prospective clients about services provided. For example, online adoption photolistings have drastically increased the accessibility of information available about children awaiting adoption. E-mail has increased social workers' abilities to communicate with clients and other service providers and is being used as a mechanism for providing case management, appointment reminders, and guidance and education services.

Videoconferencing also provides a means to increase parent-child interactions, especially when families are separated by distance. Electronic case record systems and data analysis software have increased the speed and accuracy of accessing, aggregating, and analyzing client data. Although these advances have improved service delivery, administrators and social workers must ensure that confidential client information is protected at all times through the use of appropriate security measures, including encryption; passwords; firewalls; software virus protection; secure Internet connections; and administrative and physical safeguards for electronic systems, devices, and media. Social workers shall also acknowledge that although technology can help workers to be more efficient, it cannot take the place of in-person client engagement.

Standard 7. Cultural Competence

Social workers shall ensure that families are provided services within the context of cultural understanding and competence.

Interpretation

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

Consideration should also be given to addressing the particular needs of children of color, who are overrepresented in the child welfare system. If children are placed with foster parents of a different race, ethnicity, or culture, foster parents should receive cultural sensitivity training, when appropriate. In addition, should a child or youth self-identify or question his or her sexual orientation, the foster parents and the child or youth should receive training and support to address the issue, as appropriate.

There has been an increase in the number of immigrants and their children in the United States; such changes affect the needs that child welfare services address. Social workers in child welfare shall become familiar with the latest data on population changes in their region related to

immigrant children and their families. Such changes require learning about emerging immigrant cultural heritages, immigrants' needs, and support networks and issues pertaining to immigrants' adjustment to a new country. Social workers shall also familiarize themselves with immigration laws and collaborate with appropriate immigration specialists to explore options to obtain legal status for children, youths, and families.

Standard 8. Assessment

Social workers in child welfare shall conduct an initial, comprehensive assessment of the child, youth, and family system in an effort to gather important information. The social worker shall also conduct ongoing assessments to develop and amend plans for child welfare services.

Interpretation

The social worker must be able to assess current and imminent risk and ensure that arrangements are made to protect the child in accordance with state and federal laws, agency policies, and administrative directives governing child protection. Social workers in child welfare should be clear with the family about the reasons for services, inform them of their rights, and facilitate legal representation. The social worker shall seek to understand the family's perspective, identify their strengths, and convey understanding and empathy for the family's situation and/or difficulties.

Social workers shall assess and recognize families' and individuals' protective and risk factors and ability to improve their functioning to protect and nurture their children. Social workers shall also assess aspects of personal,

familial, and social factors that can negatively affect a family's resources to care for its members. Social workers in child welfare shall identify and promote the use of supportive and preventive services, including identification of informal supports to strengthen and enhance family functioning to avoid the need for child welfare services.

Through ongoing assessments, social workers in child welfare shall document and report to protective authorities the fact that a child's safety is at risk. Because the social worker's role involves child protection, the worker is required to protect the child by using available legal processes, supervisory consultation, and immediate intervention in extreme circumstances and to document evidence and concerns to guide the child protective intervention.

Standard 9. Intervention

Social workers in child welfare shall strive to ensure the safety and well-being of children through evidence-based practices.

Interpretation

Social workers in child welfare shall remain aware of current intervention research and use evidence-based practices in service delivery. Interventions shall be designed to promote positive outcomes and involve children, youths, and families; other team members; school personnel; and other service providers as appropriate. Interventions shall be based on ongoing assessments and include goals, objectives, methods of evaluation, and outcome criteria. Social workers in child welfare shall ensure that the child's educational, medical, dental, developmental, emotional, cultural,

spiritual, social, recreational, and mental health needs are met.

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

Standard 10. Family Engagement

Social workers in child welfare shall engage families, immediate or extended, as partners in the process of assessment, intervention, and reunification efforts.

Interpretation

Social workers in child welfare shall be clear about the reasons for services, whether those services constitute an investigation or are being delivered following an investigation. The social worker shall seek to understand and incorporate the family's perspective and needs into planning for potential solutions. The social worker shall also convey an understanding of and empathy for the family's situation and actively engage the family to ensure its well-being as a unit. The

social worker shall also identify and use family strengths in problem-solving efforts that address the best interests of the child or youth. In addition, the social worker shall respect and understand each family's cultural differences and diversity and how these may influence functioning.

Standard 11. Youth Engagement

Social workers in child welfare shall actively engage older youths in addressing their needs while in out-of-home care and as they prepare to transition out of foster care.

Interpretation

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

Standard 12. Permanency Planning

Social workers in child welfare shall place children and youths in out-of-home care when children and youths are unable to safely remain

in their homes. Social workers shall focus permanency planning efforts on returning children home as soon as possible or placing them with another permanent family.

Interpretation

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

Standard 13. Supervision

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

Interpretation

Supervisors in child welfare shall possess enhanced knowledge and skills in the field and shall have a minimum of a bachelor's degree

from a social work program accredited by CSWE. They must be licensed if required by state statutes and shall have a minimum of two years of experience in the field directly related to the work of the staff they are supervising. Supervisors must also possess knowledge of the political and economic factors that affect service delivery in their community and be able to mentor staff in learning to negotiate those systems. Supervisors shall provide workers with supportive work environments through regular supervision and access to professional resources.

Standard 14. Administration

Social workers who act as administrators shall promote an organizational culture that supports reasonable caseloads and workloads, adequate supervision, appropriate use of emerging technologies, and legal protection for employees' actions in the course of carrying out their professional responsibilities.

Interpretation

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

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