NASW STANDARDS AND INDICATORS

FOR

CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Draft for Public Comment
May 6, 2015
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Overview of NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice

Standard 1. Ethics and Values
Social workers shall function in accordance with the values, ethics, and standards of the Code of Ethics (2008) of NASW. Culturally competent practices require self-awareness, cultural humility and the commitment to understanding and embracing culture as relevant and central to effective practice with diverse groups.

Standard 2. Self-Awareness
Social workers shall demonstrate an appreciation of their own cultural identities and those of others when working with diverse groups. Social Workers must also be aware of their own privilege and power by the nature of their roles or worldview and must acknowledge this position’s impact in work with clients from other cultures.

Standard 3. Cross-Cultural Knowledge
Social workers shall have and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding about the 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, religion and spirituality, sexual
orientation, social class, and abilities with cultural humility.

**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. Social workers will also demonstrate
cultural humility and sensitivity to the dynamics of power and privilege in all areas
of social work.

**Standard 5. Service Delivery**
Social workers shall be knowledgeable about and skillful in the use of services,
resources, institutions and individuals available to serve diverse cultures within
communities and be able to make appropriate referrals within formal and informal
networks for diverse client groups. They should also be cognizant of and work to
address the absence of services for client groups.

**Standard 6. Empowerment and Advocacy**
Social workers shall be aware of the impact of social systems, policies, practices
and programs on diverse client populations, advocating for, with and on behalf of
diverse 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 diverse, 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 agencies that ensure diversity within the profession.

Standard 8. Professional Education
Social workers shall advocate for, develop and participate in professional education and training that advance cultural competence within the profession. Social workers should embrace cultural competence as a focus of lifelong learning.

Standard 9. Linguistic Competence
Social workers shall provide and advocate for effective communication with culturally diverse groups, including persons of limited English proficiency, low literacy skills, persons with disabilities, persons who are blind or have low vision, and persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.
Standard 10. Leadership to Advance Cultural Competence

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

This revision of the National Standards for Cultural Competence in the Social Work Profession (the Standards) reflects the growth in the understanding of cultural competence since the development of both the Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice published in 2001 and the Indicators for the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in the Social Work Practice (2006). These revised Standards are anchored in the policy statement “Cultural and Linguistic Competence in the Social Work Profession” published in Social Work Speaks: NASW Policy Statements (2015) and the NASW Code of Ethics (2008), 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 the Social Work Profession were developed in 2006 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 upon the previous work to introduce new concepts and expand upon 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 and expression, and religious identity or spirituality. Similarly, they reinforce the intended audience for these standards are to the broad spectrum of social work practice at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. The revised standards introduce concepts of “cultural humility”, as a guiding stance vis-á-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 “linguistic competence” as a concept to address a range of communication issues to include limited English proficiency, literacy and disabilities. Finally, the revisions revisit the way we as a profession engages in ‘leadership’ to promote and advance cultural competence within the profession, human services and society at large.
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.” (NASW, 2015, p.65)

The United States is constantly undergoing major demographic changes. The demographic shift is projected to continue with an increase in minority populations. In 1980, eighty percent of the population was white and in 2014, the proportion had decreased to sixty three percent and projected through 2060 to continue this decline to forty four percent. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Shifts in the growth of minority populations (Hispanics, Asians, Blacks, and Native Americans) are projected to continue to increase, and by 2044 more than fifty percent of Americans are expected to be a member of a minority group. (Colby, S., & Ortman, J., 2014). Those changes alter and increase the diversity confronting social work practitioners, administrators, and executives daily in their settings. These changes affect the social work policy agenda at organizational, local 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 complexities associated with cultural diversity in the United States affect all aspects of professional social work practice, requiring social workers to strive to deliver culturally competent services to an ever-increasing broad range of clients and communities. 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) system to address social functioning, in which individuals experience relationships influenced by interrelated factors of functioning, environmental, physical and emotional
challenges, and Karl and O’Keefe (2008) have advanced the person in environment concept to address functionality. Social workers using this ecological perspective of a person-in-environment framework for assessment recognize the need to include varying degrees of important cultural factors that have meaning for clients and reflect the culture of the world around them.

Diversity is more than race and ethnicity, and includes the sociocultural experiences of people of different genders, social classes, religious and spiritual beliefs, sexual orientations, ages, and physical and mental abilities. The social work and human service literature points to the range of potential content areas that require 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 stresses; 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 how to train for 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. Further it requires that social workers acknowledge their own position of power vis-à-vis the populations served and present themselves in a stance of “cultural humility” (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). The achievement of cultural competence is an ongoing process. 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

The National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in 2015 has 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 Code of Ethics (2008)*, The 10th edition of *Social Work Speaks (2015)*, the 6th edition of *The Social Work Dictionary (2013)* and other academic sources.

Areas of Practice

In these standards, “practice” refers to at all levels of practice - micro, mezzo, and macro. The following definitions come from 6th Edition of *The Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 2013)

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).

Culture

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

“The word ‘culture’ is used because it 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” (NCCC, 2015). 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 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, religion and spirituality, sexual orientation, social class, and abilities.

The Preamble to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) 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.” 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.”

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 “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 & Furuto, 2001; Fong, 2004; Lum, 2011)

“Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or among professionals and enable the system, agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (NCCC, 2015).

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.
On the organizational level, there are five essential elements that contribute to a system’s ability to become more culturally competent (Cross, Bazron, Dennis and Isaacs, 1989 cited in NCCC, 2015). 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 Code of Ethics (2008). 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, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability.

Finally, the Code reemphasizes the importance of cultural competence in the last section of the Code, 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, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability.

Cultural competence is never fully realized, achieved, or completed, but rather cultural competence 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 / ingredient of professional identity that encourages self evolvement / evolvement of self through ones professional life, as well as evolvement of the profession’s identity that bridges social distance as well as power differential between the social worker / human service worker and client systems (Ramanathan, 2014).
Cultural Humility is 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 non paternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” (p.117). The practice of cultural humility provides greater focus on the role of the social worker as learner and listener, empowering clients as “experts’ in their own lives. In this context, cultural humility is viewed as both a value and practice. As Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington and Utsey (2013) suggest that cultural humility is a way of maintaining 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 race and ethnicity, immigration and refugee status, religion and spirituality, sexual orientation, social class, and abilities.

An intersectionality approach to social work practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels includes integrating the various diversity components and approaching practice from a holistic point of view. For example, a first generation person would be approached to receiving help in recognition of his or her race and ethnicity, religious and spiritual expression, sexual orientation, social class, sexual orientation and abilities in the context of his or her nuclear and extended family and community. Intersectionality theory is reinforced by critical race theory and social systems theory, emphasizing people and their human behavior in their social and economic environments. Thus, intersectionality perspective provides a comprehensive approach with a commitment to social justice, and captures transactions in the person in environment configuration that form the common base for social work knowledge and practice.
Goals and Objectives of the Standards

These standards provide guidance and focus for the development of effective culturally competent social work practice. These standards provide guidance to social workers in all areas of social work practice in responding effectively, reflectively, knowledgeably, sensitively, and skillfully 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 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:

- provide the social work profession with articulated standards to guide knowledge, skills and values in practice and policy development related to culturally diverse populations.

- articulate specific standards to guide growth, learning, and assessment in the area of cultural competence

- establish standard indicators so that social workers in all areas of practice can monitor and evaluate culturally competent practice and policies

- educate consumers, governmental regulatory bodies, and others, such as insurance carriers, about the profession’s standards for culturally competent practice

- maintain and 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.
Standard 1. Ethics and Values

Social workers shall function in accordance with the values, ethics, and standards of the Code of Ethics (2008) of NASW. Culturally competent practices require self-awareness, cultural humility and the commitment to understanding and embracing culture as relevant and central to effective practice with diverse groups.

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 Code of Ethics (2008) speaks directly to cultural competence in section 1.05-Cultural Competence and Social Diversity. The Code 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 Code of Ethics (2008) 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 Code of Ethics states:

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

b. 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.

c. 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,” has been introduced in these standards to underscore its importance in culturally competent practice. Tervalon & Murray-Garcia (1998) describe cultural humility as follows,

“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 non paternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” p.117.

In relationship to child welfare practice, Ortega & Coulborn (2011) describe 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 “experts’ 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 in order to be culturally 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 struggle with ethical dilemmas arising from value conflicts or special needs of diverse 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. (This does not imply a universal nor automatic acceptance of all practices of all cultures.) For example, some cultures subjugate women, oppress persons based on sexual orientation, and 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 will demonstrate**

1. Knowledge and practice of the NASW Code of Ethics
2. Understanding cultural humility as a complement 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 personal and professional values, and those of other cultures.
5. Ability to recognize the convergence and disparity between how 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 strengths
7. Capacities to manage and effectively negotiate the ethical dilemmas encountered in work with diverse groups in relative 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 when working with diverse groups. Social Workers must also be aware of their own privilege and power by the nature of their roles or worldview and must acknowledge this position’s impact in work with clients from other cultures.

**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 the informed assumptions about clients’ cultural backgrounds and experiences in the United States. This awareness of personal values, beliefs, stereotypes and biases inform their practice and influence relationships with clients. Social Workers must also be aware of occupying a role of privilege and power by the nature of their role or worldview and must acknowledge this position’s impact on oppressed populations. Cultural competence includes knowing and acknowledging how fears, ignorance, and the “isms” (racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, classism) have influenced their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings.

Social workers need to be able to move from being culturally aware of their own heritage to becoming culturally aware of the heritage of others. They can value and celebrate differences in others rather than maintain an ethnocentric stance and can demonstrate comfort with differences between themselves and others. They have an awareness of personal and professional limitations that may
warrant the referral of a client to another social worker or agency 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 the diversity within one’s own group, one can be more open to the diversity within other groups.

Cultural competence also requires social workers to appreciate how workers need to move from cultural awareness to cultural sensitivity before achieving cultural competence 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 supervision and agency administration. Agency administrators and public policy advocates also need to develop strategies to reduce their own biases and expand their self-awareness.

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**Indicators**

**Culturally competent social workers will**

1. examine and describe their cultural background, social identities, and cultural heritage, religious and spiritual beliefs to increase awareness of assumptions, values, beliefs, stereotypes, biases and recognize how these affect services and influence relationships and interactions with clients.

2. identify how knowledge, fears, and “isms” (racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, classism) influence 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 their needs and the skills to do this effectively.

5. demonstrate increased 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 multiple identities.

**Standard 3. Cross-Cultural Knowledge** Social workers shall have and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding about the 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, religion and spirituality, sexual orientation, social class, and abilities with cultural humility.

**Interpretation**

Culture is a universal phenomenon and everyone is part of a culture. Cultural education begins with social workers understanding their own roots and culture, and with such a sense of grounded identity, they can learn and value others. To have a grounded understanding of diversity, adequate awareness of global interdependence is critical. In order to be effective social work practitioners and researchers, there is a need to focus on cultural awareness as well as cross-cultural transactions. This awareness of global interdependence is critical, whether the professional social worker is engaged in social work assessment, intervention, or evaluation. Unprecedented movement of people across the globe, globalization of labor, concerted attention to educational exchanges, to prepare practitioners of an interdependent world increases the importance of
cultural competence and (Link & Ramanathan, 2011) cross cultural knowledge. 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. This description implies deep understanding of the layers within us 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 particular providers and client groups they work with. This would include 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 the delivery of services.

They also must seek specialized knowledge about U.S. social, cultural, and political systems. Knowledge of how the systems operate and how they serve or fail to serve specific client groups would be important. This includes knowledge of institutional, class, culture, religious traditions, spiritual belief systems, and language barriers that prevent diverse client group members 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 diverse client groups.

**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 diverse communities
   - the role of language, speech patterns, and communication styles of diverse client groups
• the impact of social service policies on diverse groups served
• the resources such as agencies, people, informal helping networks, and research that can be mobilized on behalf of diverse clients

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 diverse 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 language barriers to service.
5. identify the limitations and strengths of contemporary theories and practice models and identify 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 non-dominant status has on interpersonal relations and group dynamics in the workplace.

9. distinguish between intentional and unintentional assertion of race and class privilege.

10. recognize the intersection of “isms” (for example, racism with classism) and the institutionalization of “isms”.

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 interaction of the cultural systems of the social worker, client, the particular service setting, and the broader immediate community.
13. demonstrate cultural humility and empathy towards clients from the 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. Social workers will also demonstrate cultural humility and sensitivity to the dynamics of power and privilege in all areas of social work.

Interpretation

Practice in an increasingly multicultural and global world requires social workers to hone new skills for practice and policy development while continuing to enhance the knowledge base that informs the enhancement of their skills. Most specifically, active listening, empathy, strengths-based interventions are essential skills in culturally competence practice. In addition, comfort in asking questions, critical thinking, and comfort in “not knowing” opens communication and builds the relationships critical to helping and advancing social justice.

Cultural humility is described as a complement to cultural competence (Ortega & Coulborn, 2011). Cultural humility actively involves diverse clients 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 skill to work sensitively and effectively at counteracting biases based on our 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 the cultural and community resources important to client and client groups. Engaging the client in finding solutions requires clinical skills of engagement and the flexibility to consider what is best for the client. Second language acquisition and expertise are included here as cross-cultural skills.
In policy and research settings, 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 from different cultures, religions, and spiritual beliefs, taking responsibility for learning about these differences and recognizing the multiple identities that are inherent in understanding people and their 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

- practice interview techniques that appreciate the role of diverse languages and meanings (with attention to verbal and non-verbal communication) in the client’s culture.

- demonstrate sensitivity to the challenges in the use of interpreters

- conduct culturally effective assessments and culturally appropriate intervention plans, involving and empowering clients by respecting their opinions 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 diverse clients and groups and respond in culturally empathic ways.
• understand the interaction of the cultural systems of the social worker, the client, the particular agency setting, and the broader immediate community.

• effectively use the clients’ natural support system in resolving problems—for example, folk healers, storefronts, religious and spiritual leaders, families of creation, 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 diverse client groups.

**Indicators**

**Culturally competent social workers will:**

1. interact with persons 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 problem or symptomatic behavior.

4. assess cultural strengths and limitations/ 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, multicultural, or marginal experiences in their environments.

6. adapt and use recognized culturally proficient models.

7. communicate effectively with culturally and linguistically different clients through language acquisition, proper use of interpreters, verbal and nonverbal skills, and culturally appropriate protocols.

8. advocate for the use of interpreters who are both linguistically and culturally competent and prepared to work in the social services environment and work effectively with interpreters.

9. engage with clients and client groups that are diverse with cultural humility.

10. effectively engage clients’ natural support systems in resolving problems, for example, folk healers, indigenous remedies, religious leaders, friends, family, and other community residents and organizations.

11. employ 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 blind spots.

13. 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, institutions and individuals available to serve diverse cultures within communities and be able to make appropriate referrals within formal and informal networks for diverse client groups. They should
also be cognizant of and work to address the absence of services for client groups.

Interpretation

Agencies and professional social work organizations need to support the evaluation of culturally competent service delivery models and setting standards for cultural competence within these settings. 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 diverse clients from service opportunities and seek to create opportunities for clients, matching their needs with culturally competent 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 that accommodates 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 agency to determine service needs and requirements for interpreter services.

- create service delivery systems or models that are more appropriate to particular diverse clients or client populations or advocate for the creation of such services.

- include clients as major stakeholders in the development of service delivery systems.

- ensure that program decor and design is reflective of the cultural heritage of clients and families using the service.

- attend to social issues (for example, housing, education, police, and social justice) that concern clients of diverse backgrounds.

- serve as bystanders who actively confront staff remarks that insult or demean clients and their culture.

- 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 treatment 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 cooperate with efforts to create culturally competent services and programs by:
   • recruit multicultural staff, including cultural competence requirements in job descriptions and measures of performance and promotion.
   • review current and emergent demographic trends for the geographic area served by the agency to determine needs for the provision of interpretation or other culturally relevant services.
• create service delivery systems or models that are appropriate to targeted client populations or advocate for the development and implementation of such services.

• include clients as major stakeholders in the participation, decision making, and evaluation of service delivery systems.

• ensure that program relevance and design is reflects the culture of clients and families using the service.

• attend to social issues (for example, housing, education, police, and social justice) that concern clients of diverse backgrounds.

• Effective strategies for confronting staff remarks that insult or demean clients and their culture.

• support the inclusion of cultural competence standards in accreditation bodies and organizational policies as well as in licensing and certification examinations.

• develop staffing plans that reflect the targeted client population (for example, hiring, position descriptions, performance evaluations, training).

• develop performance measures to assess culturally competent practice.
• supporting participation of client groups in the development of research, treatment, and intervention protocols.

3. **build organizations that are culturally competent through the following policies and practices:**
   - create 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.
   - staff composition reflecting the diversity of the client population.
   - service planning strategy that includes an assessment/analysis of the client demographics compared to 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 plant designed and decorated in a manner that is welcoming to the diverse cultural groups served.
• engagement in advocacy to improve social issues relevant to client group.

• a work climate that addresses workforce diversity challenges and promotes respect for clients and colleagues of different backgrounds.

• advocate for culturally competent policies and procedures from accrediting, licensing, and certification bodies, and contracting agencies.

• include 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 diverse client populations, advocating for, with and on behalf of diverse 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 diverse, marginalized and oppressed populations.

Interpretation

Social workers with cultural competence in practice and policy settings should be aware of and take action to confront and change the deleterious effects of racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, heterosexism or homophobia, religious bias, ethnocentrism, classism, and xenophobia on clients’ lives. Social advocacy and social action should be directed at empowering diverse clients and strengthening communities. Social workers should be a voice for anti-isms and social justice with colleagues and clients who express biases and stereotypes regarding persons or diverse cultural groups.
Empowerment has been defined as an intervention, a skill and a process. Hegar and Hunseker (1988) and McDermott (1989) describe 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 impact one. Empowerment refers to the person’s ability to do for themselves while advocacy implies doing for the client. Even in the act of 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 in the United States. 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 workers consider client situations as they describe needs in terms of 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. The expectation is that culturally competent social workers reflect these values in their practice.

**Indicators**

Culturally competent social workers will:

1. Advocate for public policies that respect the strengths, cultural values, norms, and behaviors of diverse cultures, groups and communities.

2. Advocate for policies that address social injustice, institutionalized “isms.”

3. Select appropriate strategies to intervene with colleagues, collaborating partners, and institutional representatives, helping them examine their levels of awareness and the behavioral consequences of the “isms,” such as exclusionary behaviors, or oppressive policies by:
• assessing level of readiness for feedback and intervention of the dominant group member.

• adopt strategies including developing allies, education, dialogue, increased intergroup contact, social advocacy, or social action.

• participate in social advocacy and social action to better empower diverse clients and communities at the local, state, and/or national level.

4. Employ practice approaches that help the client facilitate a connection with their own power in a manner that is appropriate for their cultural context.

5. Provide support to diverse cultural, religious and spiritual groups who are advocating on their own behalf.

6. Partner, collaborate, and ally with client groups in advocacy efforts.

7. Work to increase the client group’s skills and sense of self-efficacy as social change agents.

8. Demonstrate intentional effort to assure that one does not impose one’s own personal values in practice.


Standard 7. Diverse Workforce

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

Interpretation

Increasing cultural competence within the profession requires demonstrated efforts to recruit and retain a diverse 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. Diversity should be represented at all levels
of the organization, 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) Whereas, male social
workers are: 85 percent are white, 8 percent are Africa American, 5 percent are
Latino, and 2 percent identify as other. (NASW, CFWS, 2006b)
The proportion of people of color has increased in the social work membership
of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) 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 (NASW Membership Data

Major demographic shifts in the US population “will affect the social work
workforce, their clients, agencies, organizations, communities and service
delivery systems.”(NASW, CFWS, 2011). Social work client populations are more
diverse than the social work profession itself. In many instances, service to
clients is targeted to marginalized communities and special populations, groups
that typically include disproportionately high numbers of people of color, elderly
people, 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 need for social workers to increase cultural and ethnic
competence (Gilberman, 2005; Whitaker, Weismiller Clark & Wilson, 2006). To
meet this identified need for increase diversity in the workforce, the federal
government has taken steps through the funding of education and training
programs for minority health and mental health workers, including social workers.
(United States Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and
Services Administration [HRSA], 2015).
Aligning workforce demographics to client populations can be an effective strategy for bridging cultural differences between social worker and client, 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 a special skill or knowledge to the profession, like bicultural and bilingual skills, or American Sign Language (ASL) 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 diverse workforce and organization that reflects the demographics of the population served and population it could serve throughout all levels of the organization.
3. advocate for and support policies that assure equity, and appropriate compensations and for social workers who bring special skills or knowledge to the profession, such as bicultural and bilingual skills or American Sign Language 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 proficiency and capacity to serve a variety of populations.

Culturally competent organizations will

1. develop and implement human resource and other organizational policies, procedures, and practices that support staff diversity at all levels of the organization.

2. develop and implement policies, procedures, and practices that effectively address the dynamics of a diverse workforce.

3. regularly monitor the extent to which their management and staff composition reflect the diversity of the client population and the community at large.

4. take corrective action as appropriate and refocus recruitment efforts; review their selection and hiring policies for inclusion and/or inadvertent exclusion of the underrepresented, underserved, and oppressed cultural groups and the community at large.

5. regularly monitor and take remedial action as needed to ensure that diverse client groups may receive services and be able to communicate in their native or 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 and bilingual skills or American Sign Language skills.
6. include cultural competency, as a requirement for job performance, by including these requirements 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 individuals, 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 and/or
   - intolerance of bias, discrimination, marginalization within the organization and among colleagues

**Standard 8. Professional Education**

Social workers shall advocate for, develop and participate in professional education and training 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 diverse client populations. Diversity and cultural competence needs to be addressed in social work curricula and practice behaviors to be viewed as relevant to faculty and
staff appointments and research agendas.

The social work profession should be encouraged to take steps to ensure 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 work professionals. 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. Social agencies should be encouraged to provide culturally competent in-service training and opportunities for continuing education for agency-based workers. NASW should contribute to the ongoing education and training needs for all social workers, with particular emphasis on promoting culturally competent practice in continuing education offerings in terms of content, faculty, and auspice.

In addition, the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) clearly states, “Social workers who provide supervision and consultation are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries” (NASW, 2008, 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 for the full spectrum of social work practice roles—direct practice, supervision, administration, policy and agency practice.
Indicators

Culturally competent social workers will

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

2. promote professional education that advances cultural competency within the profession

3. advocate for the infusion and integration of cultural competence and cultural humility in social work curricula and research at the BSW, MSW, and PhD levels.

4. promote enhancement of the knowledge base for culturally competent practice by encouraging and conducting research that develops conceptual, theoretical, and practice skills to guide practice at all levels.

5. advocate for professional education on social justice and inclusion to work effectively with diverse populations.

6. in organizational settings, 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 competency knowledge and skills to all employees, including top management, middle management, frontline supervisors, frontline staff, and administrative/custodial staff.
2. resolve racial, ethnic, and/or cultural conflicts between staff and the clients served and among employees within the organization itself.

3. teach skills to conduct evaluation research to ensure effectiveness in serving and engaging with culturally diverse client groups.

4. determine the demographics of their service area and assess potential service utilization gaps of culturally diverse client groups in the geographic area.

Standard 9. Linguistic Competence

Social workers shall provide and advocate for effective communication with culturally diverse groups, including persons of limited English proficiency, low literacy skills, persons with disabilities, persons who are blind or have low vision, and persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Interpretation

Social workers should accept the individual person in his or her 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 language in their individual and communal life.

Language diversity is a resource for society, and linguistic diversity 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)

Agencies and service providers that receive federal funds are, therefore, required to facilitate quality language access at no charge to the consumer. Agencies cannot discriminate or have methods of administering services that may subject individuals to discrimination. Agencies and providers of services are expected to take reasonable steps to provide services and information in appropriate languages, other than English, to ensure that people with limited English proficiency are effectively informed and can effectively participate in and benefit from its programs. Similarly, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires communication accommodation for persons with disabilities.

It is the responsibility of social services agencies and social workers to provide clients services in the language of their choice or to seek the assistance of trained language interpreters. Social workers need to communicate respectfully and effectively with clients from different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. It is advantageous if the worker speaks the language with the proficiency
required for the type of interaction one is having (e.g., the language skill is
different for casual conversation as compared to psychotherapy). Trained
professional interpreters (e.g. certified or registered sign language interpreters)
should be used. Interpreters should be treated as members of the service
provision team and offered orientation and training for the type of setting and
services that are being provided (e.g. medical, legal, mental health, child welfare.)
The orientation and training would include guidelines regarding specialized terms
and concepts, confidentiality, interpreter/client relationships, and social work
profession ethical considerations that may reinforce their 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 (e.g. consent for treatment), informational and educational materials,
and public awareness campaigns. Materials should be created in the appropriate
language or translated by persons with the knowledge and skills relevant to the
organizational context, understanding of the dialects within a language (e.g.,
multiple dialects 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.

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**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 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 limited English proficiency or with limited literacy.

6. advocate for the preservation and appreciation of language diversity among clients.

7. provide and advocate for reasonable accommodations of persons’ language needs, including sign language interpreters, assistive devices, 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 trained interpreters and translators (for example, 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 agency policies to support the effective use of and standards for professional interpretation and translation, and to support the effective use of, 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 diverse groups in agencies, organizational settings and communities. Social workers should also demonstrate responsibility for advancing cultural competence within and beyond our organizations, helping to build and sustain diverse and inclusive institutions and communities.

Interpretation

Leadership has been described as an “activity that mobilizes the resources of people or an organization to make progress on difficult problems” (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.

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 our own positions of power
and privilege advance or impede progress relative to cultural competence in our own organizations. In areas such as recruitment, hiring, promotion, teambuilding and conflict management, social workers should be vigilant about colluding with forces that often reinforce the 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. Rank and Hutchison (2000) identified, through a survey of social workers, that diversity skills, e.g. sensitivity to diversity, multicultural leadership, acceptance and tolerance, cultural competence, and tolerance of ambiguity, as 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 voice and agent of change for injustices in our immediate sphere of influence with colleagues and peers. Our responsibility is to advance cultural competence with our clients and within our organizations, profession and broader communities.

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

**Indicators**

Culturally competent social work leaders will

1. advance and promote culturally competent practice with clients and within organizations, the social work profession, and broader communities.

2. create effective diverse work teams.

3. incorporate and disseminate information on cultural competence and cultural humility in professional activities e.g. committee work, scholarship, research and in other appropriate arenas.

4. work in partnership with diverse clients and communities to strengthening these communities, encouraging the use of power and facilitating client/community empowerment.
5. advocate for fair and equitable treatment of clients, colleagues and diverse cultural groups within and beyond the profession.

6. serve in roles where they can make a difference in advancing diversity, inclusion and cultural competence.

7. develop the skill and confidence to engage in and facilitate difficult conversations about matters of difference.

8. recognize and respect the strengths and differences in professional and personal relationships with others who are different from us.

9. address resistance to the adoption of culturally competent practice.

10. engage colleagues in the identification and implementation of strategies that strengthen and sustain diverse and inclusive multicultural organizations.

11. mobilize colleagues, clients and organizations to address injustice, bias, and isms on all levels.
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