



## **SOCIAL WORK SCOPE OF PRACTICE**

### **PREAMBLE**

Social work developed as a 20<sup>th</sup> century profession out of its voluntary philanthropy and social reform roots. These roots are linked to deeply rooted values and concepts of charity, equality and compassion toward others in time of need. The profession's contemporary roots are particularly connected to social welfare developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These developments included reform movements to change negative societal attitudes toward people in need; charity societies to help individuals and families; settlement houses to improve living conditions at the neighborhood level; and rising feminist advocacy for human rights, social justice and gender equality. The profession of social work is uniquely founded on altruistic values respecting the inherent dignity of every individual and the obligation of societal systems to provide equitable structural resources for all their members.

Social work's primary concern is the social well-being of all people equally with attention to their physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Social work pioneers were among the first to address the significance of deeply connected relationships that constitute the social context of people's lives.

The primary focus of social work practice is on the relationships between individuals, their natural support resources, the formal structures in their communities, and the societal norms and expectations that shape these relationships. This relationship-centred ecological focus is a distinguishing feature of the profession. Given this rich heritage, social work is recognized for its familiar "person-in-environment" perspective, which characterizes the unique relationship-centered focus of the profession.

Social work practice reflects a balance of three components: practice perspectives; practice principles; and concrete practice provisions, i.e., specific guidelines. This document addresses all three of the practice components of social work, client and service support, as well as providing an overview of social work's specific perspective and practice domains.

The purpose of the National Scope of Practice Statement (NSPS) is to foster a growing understanding of the social work profession. The NSPS is a reference for social workers, CASW member associations, students in social work, those served by social workers and

the community at large to inform the public and promote an accountable, effective profession. The statement is prepared as a consultation document. It can be used in part or whole to assist in meeting the information needs of diverse audiences, including legislators and those served by social workers, who may require or prefer a plain language statement that briefly and concisely describes the scope of social work (Appendix 3).

### **Scope of Social Work**

A basic goal of social work is to facilitate the “social well-being” and “social functioning” of the “person-in-environment.” Each of the key concepts in this statement is essential to the understanding of the scope of social work. The World Health Organization (W.H.O.) recognizes social well-being as an integral component of a person’s overall state of health, complementary to, but different from, physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Social functioning refers to the way people perform their social roles and to the way societies provide structural supports to help them perform their roles. The person-in-environment perspective recognizes the impact of societal systems such as natural support networks and the formal structures within communities that may enhance or inhibit individual social well-being.

At the core of social work practice, these concepts guide the work of practitioners in diverse fields of service. However, depending on the chosen area of practice, the roles and responsibilities of social workers can widely vary. For this reason, it is proposed that this scope of practice statement be more clearly defined, in order to effectively examine the bounds of the social work profession. The scope of social work has several defining elements.

### **Practice Domain**

The person-in-environment domain gives social work a common organizing framework and a holistic context for its mission and vision. The global vision of social work is a world consistently working toward social justice and well-being for all citizens. The central mission is to have social workers engaged in activities that will improve social well-being structures and enhance individual, family and community social functioning at local, national and international levels.

### **Practice Preparation**

In Canada, the profession of social work constitutes a community of post-secondary educated social workers. They are guided in their work by international ethical principles (Appendix 4); a national code of ethics (Appendix 5); provincial statutes governing registration, regulations and standards of practice; common curriculum requirements in schools of social work; and an expanding repertoire of evidence-based methods of

practice. Social work includes generalist and specialist prepared practitioners who are well grounded in the knowledge, skills and ethical foundations of social work. Social workers are equally committed to the use of knowledge from the humanities and sciences to advance the development of common human rights, equitable social justice, and sufficient structural supports for individual, family and community social well-being in all human societies. To this end, social workers are expected to be sensitive to the value of cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice.

Like other professions in Canada, accredited baccalaureate education is considered the first professional practice degree, preparing social workers to practice as generalists. Adept in the areas of assessment, counseling and advocacy, these workers may practice with individuals, families, groups and communities, working at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. It may be argued however, that BSW-level practitioners lack the specialized training in advanced research and therapeutic intervention such that is taught at the graduate (Master's) and post-graduate (PhD) levels (New York State Education Department, 2004). Acknowledging this issue, many US states for example, have clearly outlined the roles and responsibilities that differentiate BSW-level from MSW-level practice. To further define social work roles, MSW-level practice is now often being divided by specialization in either macro-level practice or clinical therapy (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, n.d.; State of Michigan, 2005; Texas State Board of Social Work Examiners n.d.).

## **Practitioners**

Social workers are expected to have a comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of their own person-in-environment systems. They are prepared to rise above personal biases and preferences to advance the social well-being of others through their practice of social work. Practitioners are instructed to constantly monitor and evaluate personal and professional influences that bear on the scientific and intuitive ways they use themselves as social change agents in practice situations. At the professional level, they are expected to perform a variety of professional roles, integrate the relevant codes of professional conduct that apply to their practice activities and adhere at all times to explicit standard of care tenets.

In Canada, social work registration is regulated by designated provincial bodies. The registration process promotes ethical practice and serves to protect social work consumers by making certain that practitioners are competent to provide services. Recently, there has been a growing trend toward licensure for social workers in other jurisdictions and it is proposed that the CASW follow this lead (Kurzman, 2004). Like registration, the process of licensure ensures competency and adherence to ethical practice. The license however, would hold practitioners to a new level of accountability, as non-licensed practitioners could face legal action for holding themselves out to be social workers (MacDonald & Adachi, 2001). In many regions, new BSW and MSW

workers are required to complete a period of employment under the supervision of more experienced practitioners (Pennsylvania Society for Clinical Social Work, 2006). Also within this process, continuing education and periodic reconfirmation could be made mandatory for license renewal.

The consumers of social work services in Canadian communities often belong to the most vulnerable populations. In order to protect their safety and to be sure that quality programs and services are being provided by highly-trained, competent professionals it seems only reasonable to require that practitioners adhere to licensure guidelines. This form of regulation will also lend credibility and protect the integrity of the social work profession.

### **Practice Methods**

Social work's practice methods are rooted in the early adoption of a clearly stated study, diagnosis and treatment process to systematize practice in a person-in-environment context. Implementation of the practice process was initially done through a variety of fields of practice, including child welfare, family services, medical social work, psychiatric social work and school social work, and several method specialties, including social casework, social group work and community organization.

Contemporary practice methods are based on a systematic process of problem solving which empowers individuals, families, groups and communities to identify and use their own problem solving skills in order to improve their life situations, and requires social workers to simultaneously address broader social issues which affect people's ability to obtain needed resources. The practice method is facilitated through the application of social work values, ethical principles and practice skills to accomplish the core functions of social work (Appendix 3).

Practice methods in social work are those commonly used by qualified social workers (Appendix 1) or identified as restricted activities limited to social workers with specific qualifications (Appendix 2). Social work practice activities used to accomplish the core functions include direct practice with consumers, community organizing, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation.

### **Future Direction**

Social work's original scope of practice was broadly defined by its pioneering and value-based person-in-environment perspective, which shifted to a narrower scope defined by practice methods and the influence of scientific methods of intervention. Today, social work practice continues to be influenced by the scientific method but the sphere of influence is broadening again to include new advances being made in the humanities and sciences. The profession's distinguishing focus on relationship networks between people

in their social environment contexts will continue to be a valued aspect of its scope of practice and increasingly a focus borrowed by other helping professions.

Perhaps the next challenge for Canadian social work will be to redefine itself again, this time along the lines of professional licensure. As registration guidelines vary widely from province to province it is proposed that there may be a role for the CASW to create a more common ground by further clarifying the scope of practice and creating a licensure system that would assure greater accountability and proper qualifications of all social work practitioners. Just as professionals are encouraged to participate in continuing education for the growth and relevancy of their practice methods, so too does the field of social work find itself faced with an opportunity for growth and the betterment of practice.

## APPENDIX 1

The following list is an example of practice methods commonly used by social workers. It is not presented as an exhaustive list or as an exclusive list that only social workers can practice.

Case management	Psychosocial therapy	Community resource coordination
Child protection assessments	Psychotherapy	Developmental social welfare
Client-centred therapy	Social casework	Grassroots mobilization/locality development
Clinical social work	Social group work	Program evaluation
Crisis management	Client advocacy	Neighbourhood and community organizing
Discharge planning	Network facilitation	Political and social action
Family and marital therapy	Network skills training	Social planning
Family mediation	Structural social work	Social policy analysis and development
Group therapy	Class action social work	Structural change

## APPENDIX 2

### Proposed Roles and Responsibilities Based on Education and Specialization

Roles and Responsibilities	BSW	MSW	
		Macro	Clinical
Advocacy for individual/group/community	X	X	X
Education, information and referral	X	X	X
Facilitation of linkages with community resources	X		
Psychosocial assessment	X		X
Case management	X		X
Individual, family and group counseling	X		
Intervention planning and evaluation	X		
Program planning and evaluation	X	X	
Research	X	X	
Community organization	X	X	
Education and training related to community needs and problems		X	
Development of social welfare policy		X	
Consultation regarding agency practice and policy development		X	X
Supervision (macro social workers)		X	
Supervision (clinical social workers)			X
Individual, marital, family and group therapy			X
Treatment planning and evaluation			X
School social work			X
Corrections social work			X
Medical setting social work			X
Psychotherapy with adults and children			X
Independent clinical practice			X

Adapted from State of Michigan (2005), and Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners (n.d.).

## APPENDIX 3

### **Brief Scope of Practice Statements**

The following statements provide examples of what might be a brief and concise scope of practice statement that meets the requirements of a legislative body and/or the needs of the general public.

Social work is the application of social work knowledge, values, focus and practice methods in a person-in-environment context to accomplish the core functions of social work:

- helping people obtain basic human need services;
- Counseling and psychotherapy with individuals, families and groups;
- Helping communities/groups provide or improve social and health services; and
- participating in relevant legislative and social policy processes.



## APPENDIX 4

### IFSW Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work

- Social workers serve the development of human beings through adherence to the following basic principles:
- Every human being has a unique value, which justifies moral consideration for that person.
- Each individual has the right to self-fulfillment to the extent that it does not encroach upon the same right of others, and has an obligation to contribute to the well-being of society.
- Each society, regardless of its form, should function to provide the maximum benefits for all of its members.
- Social workers have a commitment to principles of social justice.
- Social workers have the responsibility to devote objective and disciplined knowledge and skill to aid individuals, groups, communities, and societies in their development and resolution of personal-societal conflicts and their consequences.
- Social workers are expected to provide the best possible assistance to anybody seeking their help and advice, without unfair discrimination on the basis of gender, age, disability, colour, social class, race, religion, language, political beliefs, or sexual orientation.
- Social workers respect the basic human rights of individuals and groups as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions derived from that Declaration.
- Social workers pay regard to the principles of privacy, confidentiality, and responsible use of information in their professional work. Social workers respect justified confidentiality even when their country's legislation is in conflict with this demand.
- Social workers are expected to work in full collaboration with their clients, working for the best interests of the clients but paying due regard to the interests of others involved. Clients
- Are encouraged to participate as much as possible, and should be informed of the risks and likely benefits of proposed courses of action.
- Social workers generally expect clients to take responsibility, in collaboration with them, for determining courses of action affecting their lives. Compulsion which might be necessary to solve one party's problems at the expense of the interests of others involved should only take place after careful explicit evaluation of the claims of the conflicting parties. Social workers should minimize the use of legal compulsion.
- Social work is inconsistent with direct or indirect support of individuals, groups, political forces or power-structures suppressing their fellow human beings by employing terrorism, torture or similar brutal means.

## **APPENDIX 5**

### **CASW Code of Ethics Obligations**

A social worker shall carry out his/her professional duties and obligations with integrity and objectivity.

A social worker shall have and maintain competence in the provision of social work service to a client.

A social worker shall not exploit the relationship with a client for personal benefit, gain or gratification.

A social worker shall maintain the best interest of the client as the primary professional obligation.

A social worker shall protect the confidentiality of all information acquired from the client or others regarding the client and the client's family during the professional relationship unless:

- a) The client authorizes in writing the release of specified information, or
- b) The information is released under the authority or statute or an order of a court of competent jurisdiction.

A social worker who engages in another profession, occupation, affiliation or calling shall not allow these outside interests to affect the social work relationship with the client.

A social worker in private practice shall not conduct the business of provision of social work services for a fee in a manner that discredits the profession or diminishes the public's trust in the profession.

A social worker shall advocate for workplace conditions and policies that are consistent with the code.

A social worker shall promote excellence in the social work profession.

A social worker shall advocate change:

- a) In the best interest of the client,
- b) For the overall benefit of society, the environment and the global community.

## REFERENCES

- Canadian Association of Social Workers (2000). *CASW national scope of practice statement*. Retrieved September 25, 2007 from <http://www.casw-acts.ca/>.
- Capra, F. (1996). *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Commonwealth of Massachusetts – Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation (n.d.). *Scope of practice*. Retrieved September 30, 2007 from [http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=ocaterminal&L=6&L0=Home&L1=Licensee&L2=Division+of+Professional+Licensure+Boards&L3=Board+of+Registration+of+Social+Workers&L4=Statutes+and+Regulations&L5=Rules+and+Regulations+Governing+Social+Workers&sid=Eoca&b=terminalcontent&f=dpl\\_boards\\_sw\\_cmr\\_258cmr1200&cid=Eoca](http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=ocaterminal&L=6&L0=Home&L1=Licensee&L2=Division+of+Professional+Licensure+Boards&L3=Board+of+Registration+of+Social+Workers&L4=Statutes+and+Regulations&L5=Rules+and+Regulations+Governing+Social+Workers&sid=Eoca&b=terminalcontent&f=dpl_boards_sw_cmr_258cmr1200&cid=Eoca).
- Greene, R. & Watkins, M. (Eds.) (1998). *Serving Diverse Constituencies: Applying the Ecological Perspective*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Karls, J. & Wandrei, K. (Eds.) (1994). *Person-in-Environment System: The PIE Classification System for Social Functioning Problems*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Kemp, S., Whittaker, J. & Tracy, E. (1997). *Person-Environment Practice: The Social Ecology of Interpersonal Helping*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Kurzman, P. (2004). Licensure. Its advantages – Its dilemmas. Work to be done. *Currents*, Nov./Dec. Retrieved September 27, 2007 from <http://www.naswnyc.org/MessagefromthePresident-LicensureItsAdvantages-ItsDilemmasWorkToBeDone.htm>.
- MacDonald, A. & Adachi, R. (2001). *Regulation of social work practice in Canada*. Retrieved September 29, 2007 from <http://www.casw-acts.ca/SW-Forum/CdnSWForum-Regulation.htm>.
- Ministry of Community and Social Services (n.d.). *Review of the social work and social service work act, 1998*. Retrieved September 29, 2007 from <http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/mcass/english/publications>.

New York State Education Department – Office of the Profession (2004). *Education law: Article 154, social work*. Retrieved September 30, 2007 from <http://www.op.nysed.gov/article154.htm>

Pennsylvania Society for Clinical Social Work (2006). *Frequently asked questions about the LSW and the LCSW*. Retrieved September 27, 2007 from <http://www.pscsw.org/stud.asp>.

Pincus, A. & Minahan, A. (1973). *Social Work Practice: Model and Method*. Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock.

Sheafor, B., Horejsi, C. & Horejsi, G. (1994). *Techniques and Guidelines for Social Work Practice* (3rd Ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

State of Michigan (2005). *July 1, 2005 social work licensure begins*. Retrieved September 27, 2007 from [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdch\\_sw\\_licensebegins\\_7\\_1\\_05\\_130417\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdch_sw_licensebegins_7_1_05_130417_7.pdf).

Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners (n.d.). *About the profession – scope of practice*. Retrieved September 29, 2007 from [http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/socialwork/sw\\_scope.shtm](http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/socialwork/sw_scope.shtm).

**Approved by the CASW Board  
August 1, 2008**