



College of Health and Social Services

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Careers in Social Work

Social work is a profession for those with a strong desire to help improve people's lives. Social workers help people function the best way they can in their environment, deal with their relationships, and solve personal and family problems.

Social workers often see clients who face a life-threatening disease or a social problem. These problems may include inadequate housing, unemployment, serious illness, disability or substance abuse. Social workers also assist families that have serious domestic conflicts, including those involving child or spousal abuse.

Social workers often provide social services in health-related settings that now are governed by managed-care organizations. To contain costs, these organizations are emphasizing short-term intervention, ambulatory and community-based care, and greater decentralization of services.

Most social workers specialize. Although some conduct research or are involved in planning or policy development, most social workers prefer an area of practice in which they interact with clients.

Child, family and school social workers

Provide social services and assistance to improve the social and psychological functioning of children and their families and to maximize the family well-being and academic functioning of children. Some social workers assist single parents; arrange adoptions; and help find foster homes for neglected, abandoned or abused children.

In schools, they address such problems as teenage pregnancy, misbehavior and truancy. They also advise teachers on how to cope with problem students. Some social workers may specialize in services for senior citizens. They run support groups for family caregivers or for the adult children of aging parents. Some advise elderly people or family members about choices in areas such as housing, transportation and long-term care; they also coordinate and monitor services.

Through employee assistance programs, they may help workers cope with job-related pressures or with personal problems that affect the quality of their work.

Child, family and school social workers typically work in individual and family services agencies, schools, or state or local governments. These social workers may be known as child welfare social workers, family services social workers, child protective services social workers, occupational social workers or gerontology social workers.

Medical and public health social workers

Provide persons, families or vulnerable populations with the psychosocial support needed to cope with chronic, acute or terminal illnesses, such as Alzheimer's disease, cancer or AIDS. They also advise family caregivers, counsel patients and help plan for patients' needs after discharge by arranging for at-home services -- from meals-on-wheels to oxygen equipment. Some work on interdisciplinary teams that evaluate certain kinds of patients -- geriatric or organ transplant patients, for example.

Medical and public health social workers may work for hospitals, nursing and personal care facilities, individual and family services agencies, or local governments.

To tend to patient care or client needs, many hospitals and long-term care facilities are employing social workers on teams with a broad mix of occupations -- including clinical specialists, registered nurses and health aides.

Mental health and substance abuse social workers

Assess and treat individuals with mental illness or substance-abuse problems, including abuse of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. Such services include individual and group therapy, outreach, crisis intervention, social rehabilitation and training in skills of everyday living. They may also help plan for supportive services to ease patients' return to the community.

Mental health and substance abuse social workers are likely to work in hospitals, substance-abuse treatment centers, individual and family services agencies, or local governments. These social workers may be known as clinical social workers.

Other types of social workers include social work planners and policymakers, who develop programs to address such issues as child abuse, homelessness, substance abuse, poverty and violence.

These workers research and analyze policies, programs and regulations. They identify social problems and suggest legislative and other solutions. They may help raise funds or write grants to support these programs.

What Skills are Important?

Problem solving and counseling are essential in social work. Social workers are pro-active and knowledgeable about social policy and the delivery of social services, have vision for future planning, and understanding of human behavior.

They are especially committed to social work ethics and values.

Social workers should be emotionally mature, objective, and sensitive to people and their problems. They must be able to handle responsibility, work independently, and maintain good working relationships with clients and coworkers.

Training, Other Qualifications and Advancement

A bachelor's degree in social work (BSW) degree is the most common minimum requirement to qualify for a job as a social worker; however, majors in psychology, sociology and related fields may be adequate to qualify for some entry-level jobs, especially in small community agencies. Although a bachelor's degree is sufficient for entry into the field, an advanced degree has become the standard for many positions.

A master's degree in social work (MSW) is typically required for positions in health settings and is required for clinical work. Some jobs in public and private agencies also may require an advanced degree, such as a master's degree in social services policy or administration.

Supervisory, administrative and staff training positions usually require an advanced degree. College and university teaching positions and most research appointments normally require a doctorate in social work (DSW or PhD).