

Introduction

If you're looking for a career with meaning, action, diversity, satisfaction, and an abundance of options, consider social work. Social workers are people who care about people, who want to make things better, who want to relieve suffering, who want their work to make a difference.

Social work is a profession devoted to helping people function the best they can in their environment. This can mean providing direct services or therapy directly to people (called "clients"). It also can mean working for change to improve social conditions.

The phrase "in their environment" points to a distinguishing characteristic of social work—one that sets it apart from other helping professions. Social workers help clients deal not only with how they feel about a situation but also with what they can do about it. For example, a man suffering stress stemming from single parenting may be referred by a social worker to a child care agency. The social worker also might help him explore flextime with his employer and might work with a coalition of local employers to make flextime and child care more available. In addition, the social worker might provide therapy to help him handle the immediate stress.

Many social workers work for social change as well. The victim of an assault benefits not only from therapy but also from efforts to curb neighborhood crime. The client under stress because illness has devastated the family finances benefits from efforts to reform the nation's health care system.

About the Profession

The social work profession has its own body of knowledge, code of ethics, practice standards, credentials, state licensing, and a nationwide system of accredited education programs. These equip the professional social worker to combine the desire to help others with the knowledge, skill, and ethics needed to provide that help.

For sheer variety, few occupations can match social work, which offers the broadest range of opportunities and settings. Social workers are found in public agencies, private businesses, hospitals, clinics, schools, nursing homes, private practices, police departments, courts, and countless other interesting workplaces.

Social workers serve individuals, families, and communities. They are managers, supervisors, and administrators. They serve at all levels of government. They are educators. They are therapists and researchers. More and more, they are also elected political leaders and legislators.

Educational and Licensing Requirements

To be a social worker, one must have a degree in social work from a college or university program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education. The undergraduate degree is the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW). Graduate degrees include the Master of Social Work (MSW) and the Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) or PhD. An MSW is required to provide therapy. For information about accredited **schools of social work**, contact the Council on Social Work Education at 1600 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, 703-683-8080, www.cswe.org.

Degree programs involve classroom study as well as practical field experience. The bachelor's degree prepares graduates for generalist entry-level work, whereas the master's degree is for more advanced clinical practice. A DSW or PhD is useful for doing research or teaching at the university level.

Most states require practicing social workers to be **licensed, certified, or registered**, although standards vary. Contact the state regulatory board directly or the American Association of State Social Work Boards, www.aswb.org, 400 South Ridge Parkway, Suite B. Culpepper, VA 22701, 703-829-6880, for a list of regulatory agencies or for a comparison of state regulations.

Income

It is difficult to assign a definitive range to social work salaries; however, one thing is certain: Demand for social workers is on the rise. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, by the year 2000 there will be more than half a million social workers in the United States.

Those just starting out with a BSW can expect an annual salary ranging up to \$30,000 depending on type of work, experience, and geographic factors. A social worker with an MSW degree can expect an annual income ranging to about \$40,000; a DSW can anticipate an annual income of more than \$40,000. A few experienced private practitioners and senior administrators earn as much as \$100,000.

To learn more

- About credentials: A credential certifies that a social worker has achieved competence and professionalism beyond a college degree or state license. Credentials generally require a degree, supervised experience, and a standard examination. Find out more about [NASW Credentials](#).
 - About [NASW](#) and [Membership Benefits](#).
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Part 1

Substance Misuse and Addictions • Aging • Child Welfare • Public Welfare • School Social Work • Justice/Corrections • Developmental Disabilities • Employment/Occupational Social Work • Health Care

Substance Misuse and Addictions

Susan has been clean from heroin and sober for three years. She now has the confidence to pursue her degree in higher education, and moves to a new city to do just that. However, the stress of the move, the isolation from her support group, and the struggle to succeed in school are too much. She begins to shoot heroin again and hang out with other addicts. Her grades and attendance plummet. She drops out and becomes more desperate every day to support her habit.

Finally Susan agrees to go with a clean and sober friend to the Methadone Maintenance Outpatient clinic for help. A social worker, trained in substance misuse and addictions, helps her understand her condition and her current options. With the social worker's support, Susan decides to go on methadone for several months to stabilize her situation. The social worker meets with her regularly to help Susan identify the areas she wants to work on, such as finding employment and attending mutual-help groups in the area. Susan begins to pick up the threads of her life.

Social workers are likely to meet many Susans in a variety of social work settings. Substance misuse and addiction is a prominent theme in child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, poverty, oppression of all kinds, veterans services, elderly services, juvenile delinquency, mental health, and many other arenas where social workers practice. In addition, social workers are increasingly found in settings that were once dominated by addiction specialists certified in alcohol and drug counseling. Social workers trained in substance misuse and addictions now practice in methadone maintenance clinics, inpatient and outpatient treatment settings, residential treatment, and in government policy-making positions.

Social workers bring a much needed ecological perspective to the work in this field. Instead of only focusing on the individual client's addiction or substance misuse problem, social workers see the client in relation to the family, the neighborhood, the support system from the community, the prevailing dominant cultural attitudes and policies, and the cosmic or spiritual level. Consequently, social workers trained in addictions can be found doing case management, group and individual therapy, family counseling, advocacy for jobs and housing needs, community development of resources, educating, policymaking, and sometimes doing this all at the same time!

Social workers trained in substance misuse and addiction often work as part of a team of other professionals, especially certified alcohol and drug counselors, physicians, and nurses. Many states require alcohol and drug certification in order to work in specialized addiction treatment settings.

Social workers in this field report the deep satisfaction of watching clients who have been completely hopeless and beaten down by addiction (their own, or someone's they love), go on to recover their humanity, sense of purpose in life, and ability to make positive choices for themselves.

Related Areas

- mental health
- individual, group, family counseling
- victim services
- corrections
- child welfare
- aging

Employers

- inpatient and outpatient treatment centers
- methadone maintenance clinics
- residential treatment
- community development settings
- child welfare
- community mental health centers
- family service agencies
- schools

Aging/Gerontology

For years, Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez had been regulars at the Hispanic Senior Center, enthusiastically joining in many center activities. But since his wife's death, Mr. Gonzalez has stopped coming. His neighbors voice their concern to the center's social worker. They say he rarely leaves his apartment, refuses their offers of help, and seems disoriented.

Concerned that he may be suffering from depression, the social worker arranges to visit Mr. Gonzalez. She talks with him about his loss, fear of his own death, and life alone. She finds he feels that he is unwelcome as a single person. As he recognizes his feelings, she is able to convince him to come to the center. Slowly, Mr. Gonzalez begins again to take part in center activities and find companions.

The U.S. population is aging. We live in a country where people over 65 outnumber teenagers. This translates into a tremendous need - and a variety of opportunities - for social work with older persons and their families.

Working with older adults can mean involvement with active, healthy clients as well as those who are ill in settings that range from adult day care centers and nursing homes to hospitals, public agencies, and private corporations. Social workers form an important link between seniors and the services designed to help them.

Often, social workers will have direct contact with elderly people, providing counseling; helping them maintain their independence at home; arranging income assistance, transportation, and medical treatment; organizing recreational activities and support groups; and generally improving their quality of life. Social workers may also work with family members caring for elderly members and may help them obtain services and make plans for future care.

Many who work with seniors find that they profit from the depth and breadth of their experience, one of the more rewarding aspects of this important career.

Related Areas

- Advocacy and intervention
- Home health care
- Geriatric case management
- Public policy
- Adult day care
- Family services
- Information and referral

Employers

- Hospitals and medical centers
- Banks, insurance companies, and investment firms
- Nursing homes
- Senior centers
- Area agencies on aging
- Senior volunteer programs
- Senior housing facilities
- Mental health centers
- Family service agencies
- Employee assistance programs

Child Welfare

Narcotics officers have raided a house, arresting a husband and wife. A social worker is called to arrange care for their two young girls. When she arrives, she gently explains to the children their parent's situation. "We'll find you a good place to stay 'til mom and dad come home," she assures them. She helps each find a favorite toy and bundles them into the car.

Back at the office, the social worker first tries to locate relatives, then searches a list of approved foster homes. Most are at capacity, but one can take both. Again, she gathers up the sisters and takes them to their foster home. On the way she talks to them about their fears, explains what the foster family is like, and tells them when she will come back.

At the court hearing, the mother is released. But the judge must decide whether the children may go home or remain in foster care.

The social worker testifies, describing drug paraphernalia lying about the house within reach, the empty refrigerator, the children's dirty clothes. Later, she helps the girls understand the court's decision that their mom must complete a drug treatment program before they can go home to her.

Child welfare social workers are advocates for America's most silent minority: our nation's youths.

The social worker's job is to help ensure the health and well-being of children, primarily by supporting and strengthening their families. Often, timely services to a family can forestall a crisis.

When Child Protective Services receives a report of a neglected or abused child, social workers investigate, attempting to determine if it is safe for the child to remain in the home. If so, they may provide support services to the family in their home and link parents with community services such as child care, temporary income maintenance, job training, substance abuse treatment, counseling, or parenting classes.

In cases where families can't or won't protect their children, social workers may recommend temporary foster care. When longer term arrangements are needed, the social worker will work with lawyers and the courts and may give testimony in the child's behalf. Child welfare agencies provide services to these children and their families to reunite them if possible. If a child cannot return to the parents, the social worker seeks another permanent home, placing the child with relatives or recommending the child's release for adoption.

Intervening when children are abused or neglected, when a family is in trouble, or when parents have problems is difficult and challenging, requiring training, skill, and sensitivity. Often a social worker's intervention makes a critical difference at a key moment in a child's life.

Related fields

- Family preservation
- Child day care
- Child protection
- Family foster care
- Group care
- Adoption
- Public welfare
- Advocacy and intervention

Employers

- Adoption agencies
- Child day care
- Foster care agencies
- Family preservation agencies
- Public child welfare organizations
- Private child welfare organizations

Public Welfare

A young woman in her late 20s is suddenly deserted by her husband, leaving her with three young children. Left without income, she moves in with her recently widowed father. The move solves her immediate need for shelter, but her father's social security check is not enough to support four more people. Because she doesn't know where her husband is, she is unable to file for child support. A friend suggests that she apply for public assistance. At the welfare office, she finds she qualifies for Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, medical coverage, and housing assistance. Her children will get free breakfasts and lunches at school. She will qualify for education and job training so that eventually she will be able to support her family without help.

For more than four decades, public welfare has provided income and support services to society's most vulnerable people—children, the ill, the elderly, the disabled. Although some of these people will always need services, traditional thinking about how to help is changing as the nation debates welfare reform. How to foster self-sufficiency and move people into the mainstream is today's challenge, complicated by an increase in social problems and a general decrease in funds.

Social workers are primarily the administrators, managers, and program evaluators of the public welfare system. Some supervise intake workers and case workers who provide direct services. Social work in public welfare entails planning, administering, and financing programs; training and supervising staff; and setting and evaluating standards and criteria for service delivery.

There is no shortage of challenges in public welfare waiting for creative thinking and leadership from social workers.

Related Areas

- Income maintenance
- Adult protective service
- Housing services
- Supervision
- Management
- Administration
- Public Policy
- Research

Employers

- Public welfare agencies
- Private social service agencies

School Social Work

Although 9-year-old Robert has been a good student, his third-grade teacher notices a marked change in his work—and his attitude. The teacher contacts the school social worker, who meets with Robert and his mother. The social worker discovers that Robert's father has abandoned the family, leaving his mother depressed and in financial difficulty.

The social worker suggests extra help and counseling for Robert and invites him to join a support group in school for children of divorced parents. The social worker also refers Robert's mother to a mental health clinic, finds a neighborhood mothers' support group for her, and helps her apply for child support. With extra help and support, Robert's grades and outlook begin to improve.

Every child needs to be free from troubles that interfere with learning. Many school systems employ social workers to help children with emotional, developmental, or educational needs.

Working with teams of other school personnel, social workers help children with physical or learning disabilities or emotional problems or who face child abuse, neglect, domestic violence, poverty, or other problems.

Often the social worker's job includes interviewing the child and family to determine what if action is called for. Another function is to facilitate communication between parents and school staff. Social workers may also intervene in problem situations or mobilize parental support for students' needs.

Social workers may assess student needs, assist in discipline hearings, serve on policymaking committees, or help develop alternative programs. Other functions include facilitating school–community relations and providing a variety of services to students in special education programs.

School social workers may be the first to spot difficulties a child is confronting at home or in the community and the first to intervene. They often provide services or find services in the areas that prevent more serious problems from developing.

Related Areas

- Clinical social work
- Pupil personnel services

Employers

- Elementary and secondary schools
- Special education placement offices
- Head start centers
- Counseling centers
- Early intervention programs

Justice/Corrections

Joan, a woman in her mid-20s, has a history of drug addiction and writing bad checks. During a four-year stay in prison, social work services including therapy and workshops on drug abuse and depression help her handle her addiction and make significant progress. But her children are in foster care, and she has lost touch with her mother and sisters.

As the time for her release approaches, Joan needs a job, housing, a continuing addiction recovery program, and reunification with her family. She meets with a prison social worker who arranges for placement in a halfway house and helps her find a job and transportation. After eight months drug-free and holding her job, the halfway house social worker helps Joan find an apartment, arranges for the return of her children, locates her family, and helps her reunite with them.

In courts, rape crisis centers, police departments, and correctional facilities, you'll find social workers.

In correctional facilities, the focus is on rehabilitation. Social workers may plan and provide drug and alcohol addiction treatment, life skills and basic competency training, and therapy to help offenders function once released into the community.

Social workers can be probation and parole officers, arranging for services after an offender is released, as in Joan's case, finding a group home residence, remedial classes, job training, addiction treatment, counseling, child care, and transportation. These activities generally help raise a client's independence and self-esteem.

Social workers may also be involved in restitution programs, or victim assistance services. They may serve the court as expert witnesses or work in partnership with attorneys. In police departments, social workers may help with domestic disputes or provide trauma and critical incident services to enforcement officers.

Social work activities in corrections are diverse, as are the clients, affording the chance to develop and use a broad range of skills. Corrections and justice is a field where a social worker can focus on rehabilitation and the constructive use of authority.

Related Areas

- Corrections
- Probation
- Forensics
- Youth services
- Parole

Employers

- Prisons
- Courts
- Police departments

- Victim services programs

Developmental Disabilities

At a developmental disabilities center, the social worker receives a call from a school assessment office. Tests and evaluation have shown that a new kindergartner is moderately retarded as well as hearing impaired. The boy needs special services, and his parents need help understanding the assessment.

The social worker meets with the family to help them explore options. She brings them a list of recommended books that may be helpful. She arranges for additional developmental testing at the center to determine the child's level and help determine what services the boy may need as he matures. She arranges for them to join a support group for parents whose children have developmental disabilities. Once these initial arrangements are made, the social worker provides supportive therapy to the parents to help them deal with their feelings.

People with developmental disabilities, which can include mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism, epilepsy, and other conditions, may at some time seek out social services. The goal of the social worker is to assist such people in improving their functioning and social adjustment. Usually this is accomplished through teams that include other professionals.

Social workers help parents of children with disabilities understand their legal rights, learn to be advocates for their children, and help them find special services.

Social workers may work with individuals or groups as well as provide counseling for families. The social worker helps find the right services to enable each individual to be as independent as possible.

For the clients of social workers who serve people with disabilities those services can mean the difference between merely surviving and leading a productive and joyful life.

Related Areas

- Case management
- Planning
- Research
- Policy
- Program evaluation
- Management

Employers

- Community-based living arrangements
- State and local agencies
- Medical facilities

- Schools

Employment/Occupational Social Work

Richard has been having difficulty concentrating at work and is frequently absent. His supervisor suggests he visit the employee assistance program social worker. Richard doesn't want to go, but the program is a company benefit and he knows that improving his productivity will give him a chance at a promotion, so he agrees.

At the first appointment, the social worker takes a social history and explores what seems to be affecting Richard's performance. He says that his son is not doing well in school and his wife recently lost her job. The stress has led to family fights.

The social worker discusses school services that may help his son and community services to help his wife find a new job and suggests counseling for the whole family.

At a follow-up appointment, Richard reports that his son is getting remedial help at school and that his wife has enrolled in a job retraining program. They are beginning to feel more optimistic as they talk things through in family therapy. And Richard's supervisor reports that his productivity has returned.

With the ever-increasing competitiveness of our economy, the quality of the workforce often determines an enterprise's success or failure. Occupational social workers are a boon to our nation's businesses, helping workers with problems that affect their job performance and satisfaction. Social workers may help corporations reengineer their structure and methods to improve efficiency, creativity, productivity, and morale. Or social workers in this field may work for a union and might be involved in job counseling or organizing.

A growing practice area for occupational social workers is in employee assistance programs (EAPs). The social worker may own the EAP or be employed by a business or a union, working onsite or off. The breadth and scope of their duties can be enormous - one minute helping an executive cope with the strain of an impending takeover, the next counseling an anorexic young trainee. EAP social workers may lead groups on stress reduction or coping with layoffs. Other situations the social worker may confront include substance abuse, domestic violence, single parenting, and vocational rehabilitation. Many employee assistance programs have extended their role for corporations to the management of mental health benefits.

In the vibrant domain of American work life, social workers provide the necessary human dimension.

Related Areas

- Clinical social work
- Alcohol and other drug abuse treatment
- Health and wellness education
- Grass roots organizing

Employers

- Corporations
- Businesses
- Employee assistance programs
- Labor unions
- Organizational development

Health Care

Mr. Proctor has recovered from his heart attack, and his doctor wants to discharge him from the hospital. But his elderly wife is just recovering from a broken leg and cannot provide the care he needs at home. The social worker, in collaboration with the doctor, nurse, and physical therapist, makes arrangements for home health care, meals-on-wheels, nursing services, and other assistance. Establishing Mr. and Mrs. Proctor at home allows the couple to recover together and more happily than they would have been in separate, and more expensive, institutions.

Social workers are needed in hospitals, clinics, and other medical and health care settings to facilitate medical and emotional treatment. These social workers assess a patient's needs, manage the many services a patient may require for recovery, plan for care after hospitalization, educate patients and their families, and help them cope with the personal and emotional problems related to the illness.

Social workers are vital members of the health care team, working in concert with doctors, nurses, and other health and mental health professionals. They sensitize other health care providers to the social and emotional aspects of illness.

In health settings social workers also conduct research, develop programs, administer social work departments, lead support groups, and coordinate community resources. The health care field offers a variety of employment opportunities in homes, community health centers, outpatient clinics, and public health program, as well as in hospitals.

Related Areas

- Hospital social work
- AIDS counseling/education
- Public health
- Hospice counseling/management
- Home health care
- Case management
- Discharge planning
- Maternal and child health
- Physical rehabilitation
- Chemical dependency
- Disease prevention and health promotion

Employers

- Health maintenance organizations
 - Nursing homes
 - Hospitals
 - Clinics
 - Hospice
 - Group homes
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Choices: Careers in Social Work

Part 2

Mental Health/Clinical Social Work • Community Organization • International Social Work • Management/Administration • Policy and Planning • Politics • Research

Mental Health/Clinical Social Work

Patricia develops hallucinations and eating and sleeping problems during her first semester in college. After two weeks in the hospital with therapy and medication, she goes home to her parents. They take her to a community mental health clinic, where a clinical social worker helps her and her parents understand and cope with her condition.

Patricia feels she was not yet able to return to college, so the social worker helps her explore her options. With the social worker's encouragement and support, Patricia takes a part-time job at a local pet store. With satisfying but low-stress work, together with continued therapy and physician-monitored medication, Patricia improves. By spring semester, she enrolls in two courses at a community college and increases her hours at the pet shop.

Many people at certain times in their lives need mental health services to get the most out of life. Clinical social workers are the largest group of professionally trained mental health providers in the United States, supplying more than half of counseling and therapy services. These mental health professionals help people find solutions to problems ranging from inability to cope with day-to-day stress to severe mental illness.

The social worker's emphasis is on helping clients help themselves. Clinical social work services include aiding a client in understanding the causes of emotional distress, developing and implementing methods to resolve the situation, and, when connecting the client with appropriate community resources.

Clinical social workers are found in a wide variety of settings and often work as part of a team of other professionals. Many have their own private practices.

All clinical social workers must have all MSW. They must be licensed or certified in the state in which they practice. Many states require continuing education to maintain licensure or certification.

The challenges of mental health practice and variety in clinical social work are legion, as are the satisfactions of helping people make positive changes in their lives.

Related Areas

- Alcohol and other drug abuse treatment
- Individual and family psychotherapy and counseling
- Grief counseling
- Victim services
- Corrections
- Aging
- Child welfare
- Developmental disabilities
- Health care
- Group work
- Group therapy

Employers

- Community mental health centers
- Psychiatric hospitals
- Residential treatment centers
- Partial (day treatment) hospitals
- Managed mental health programs
- Employee assistance programs
- Schools
- Family service agencies

Community Organization

It has taken a while, but the newspaper finally runs an article on how few loans city banks are making in some neighborhoods. Residents have suspected something was amiss; houses aren't selling, and families with good credit have been turned down for home improvement loans. A social worker at the neighborhood assistance organization calls a meeting of residents to address the issue.

With the social worker's assistance, residents organize for action. They alert other community organizations to build support. They survey the neighborhood. The results showed that one in five residents have applied for a loan and nearly three-quarters had been turned down. The social worker and community leaders meet with the newspaper's editorial board. They present the survey and tell about attempts to sell homes.

The article and a subsequent editorial prompt local television reporters to pick up the story. Publicity convinces the banks that goodwill and good business require change. The social worker and resident leaders meet with banking officers to generate new policies that will enable residents to get loans, keeping the neighborhood from falling into disrepair and helping it thrive.

Helping people help themselves is a fundamental doctrine of social work. Community organizing goes a step further—helping people help themselves collectively. It is collective problem-solving by a group working on behalf of themselves and their community.

A social worker in community organizing usually works with an existing organization to tackle issues that concern people in a building, neighborhood, workplace, or community. Community organizers coordinate and facilitate activities to improve social conditions enhance the quality of life, and bring people into the political process.

Some work directly with communities. They may help stop a toxic waste incinerator, initiate an alternative school, develop a neighborhood housing plan, get drug dealers off the block, develop senior citizen programs, or organize stockholders to promote corporate responsibility. Others work for advocacy or social change organizations to improve conditions for specific groups (such as homeless people, immigrants, or refugees) or tackle issues such as welfare reform or violence prevention.

Many social workers in this field go on to lead policy or advocacy organizations. Others become elected or appointed public officials.

Social workers who choose community organizing can have a tremendous impact on the nation's communities and on social reform.

Related Areas

- Community development
- Social planning
- Program development
- Community education
- Grassroots organizing
- Consumer advocacy
- Voter registration
- Economic development
- Politics
- Group work
- Neighborhood organizing

Employers

- Advocacy organizations
- Development corporations
- Community action agencies
- Neighborhood and community centers
- Local, state, and federal governments
- Settlement houses
- Associations

International Social Work

A country's political social order crumbles and the world watches a human consequence of the turmoil—children abandoned in primitive orphanages. Humanitarian relief organizations move in to help improve conditions. Social workers are engaged to help. Some train orphanage staff in basic child development, including children's attachment and separation fears, the need for creative playtime, colorful paint and pictures on the walls, better diet, more hygienic care. Life begins to improve for the children.

Other social workers help draft standards for children's institutions including child-staff ratios, recommended activities, and staff education and training. Still others work with government agencies organizing foster care services and family services and counseling. The new services will help families stay together and offer alternatives to placing children in orphanages in the future.

The functions of international social work are nearly as diverse as the people served. On one level, the work involves direct services in refugee programs, relief efforts, inter country adoptions and development, health care, and education. But another aspect involves advancing the efforts of national governments, intergovernmental organizations, and voluntary agencies to enhance social welfare policy, technical assistance, research, and information exchange.

Social workers manage programs, train others, help develop service delivery systems train in developing countries, and much more.

International organizations such as the United Nations and its International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) employ social workers in both urban and rural projects. The World Health Organization (WHO) works on several fronts—acquired immune deficiency syndrome, drug addiction, famine—that include social work services. And the International Committee of the Red Cross performs vital disaster relief services, often with the aid of social workers.

For those practicing in this exciting field, language abilities and a desire to travel are a must as is an appreciation of other cultures. With our growing comprehension of the interdependence of nations, there is expanding potential in international social work— definitely a world worth exploring.

Related Areas

- Social development
- Community development
- Community organization
- Group work
- Advocacy
- Social planning
- Social development
- International adoption
- Technology transfer
- Family planning

- Child welfare
- Health and mental health
- Posttraumatic stress
- Substance abuse
- Management
- Social policy
- Employment services
- Refugee services
- **Employers**
- International aid organizations
- Relief organizations
- International human rights agencies
- Refugee relief agencies

Management/Administration

County revenues have not met expectations, so agency directors are told to plan budgets without increases.

As the administrator of the county welfare agency, the social worker tackles this tough, but typical problem. How to plan next year's budget without curtailing services and hurting clients, when demand is increasing?

First, she sets up a staff task force, asking for cost cutting ideas that would not sacrifice services. Next, she reviews the budget. A few projects can wait. A few vacant positions will remain empty.

The task force presents its ideas. Choosing among them, the social worker decides to reallocate funds used to place very troubled children in expensive institutions. Instead, the agency will recruit and train special foster families, using the funds to provide backup services, community therapy, respite care, and other services. Because trained foster families can often provide better care in the home at a lower cost than institutions, it is a win-win situation.

An important assignment in social work is managing when, how, to whom, and by who services are allocated. This is the job of the professional administrator.

Social work administration includes many elements common to administration in other organizations. But it also entails knowledge of human behavior, social problems, social services, and values.

The administrator's roles are diverse. They usually include policy formulation and goal setting, program design and implementation, budget development, operations management, personnel direction and supervision, fund development and resource allocations, public relations, and, perhaps most importantly, evaluation.

An administrator's day-to-day tasks may consist of setting goals, acquiring the resources to achieve those goals, problem solving and negotiating, team and coalition building, managing information, assessing future needs, and ensuring quality control. In many cases these tasks are interrelated.

Whereas in the past employers simply promoted social work practitioners into administrative positions, emphasis is now being placed on background in the administrative field and technical management ability. A capacity to work with and motivate others is key to administrative success, as are creative thinking and leadership.

Administrators chart the course of virtually all social services and can make a real difference by ensuring that agencies provide quality services equitably to those in need.

Related Areas

- Planning
- Policy
- Organization
- Development
- Advocacy

Employers

- Family service agencies
- Child welfare departments
- Social service agencies
- School pupil personnel departments
- Area agencies on aging
- State mental health departments
- Employee assistance programs
- Probation departments
- Health
- Public welfare agencies

Policy and Planning

The social worker who directs a city health agency suspects that the number of women diagnosed with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection is increasing. Although lesbian women are stereotyped as "safe" from infection, the social worker suspects that lesbian women are more susceptible to HIV than is generally recognized. Most prevention literature is targeted to gay men and heterosexuals. But some lesbians are drug users, and others have sex with men at times. A review of city health statistics confirms her suspicion: The number of cases has doubled in three years. She learns from area medical associations that gynecologists, hospitals, and clinics have no literature specifically informing lesbian women about how they can protect themselves from contracting HIV.

The social worker decides the city health agency should act. She brings her concerns to other community organizations. They form a coalition. She and other coalition leaders testify at a city council health forum to build support and get the news media involved. The social worker redirects a portion of the agency budget to develop information specifically directed at lesbian women. The new literature is distributed to area medical associations, hospitals, schools, community centers, and the news media. A review of city statistics two years later shows that the increase has slowed.

The realm of policy and planning affords different satisfactions from direct service social work. It allows the social worker to have an impact on large numbers of people.

Social workers in this field address problems such as child abuse, homelessness, substance abuse, poverty, mental illness, violence, unemployment, and racism. They work to improve systems to better conditions for the people affected.

Social workers analyze policies, programs, and regulations to see what is most effective. They identify social problems, study needs and related issues, conduct research, propose legislation, and suggest alternative approaches or new programs. They may foster coalitions of groups with similar interests and develop inter-organizational networks.

On a daily basis, this often means analyzing census data and legislation, drafting position papers, testifying at public hearings, working with the media, talking with policymakers, and lobbying elected and appointed officials. Their tasks may also involve raising funds, writing grants, or conducting demonstration projects. Often social workers are the directors of organizations that do this work.

Work on one issue may take many months or years, and change is often incremental. But work in the policy and planning field earns social workers the satisfaction of knowing they are pressing our society to improve the quality of life for all of its members.

Related Areas

- Community development
- Community organization
- Health care management
- Management
- Administration
- Political organizing
- Government relations
- Advocacy

Employers

- Public interest groups
- Local, state, and federal government
- Voluntary health and welfare councils
- Advocacy organizations

- Development corporations
- Trade associations
- Administrative agencies

Politics

"I am the first social worker in the U.S. Senate. Now I have a caseload of 4 million Marylanders. And though I am practicing in a different forum, those skills and values I learned as a community organizer in the streets of Baltimore are what make me an effective leader in the corridors of Congress."

—Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD)

Kentucky State Representative and social worker Jim Wayne campaigned on human issues—health care, foster care, education, social services to children, and the environment—issues critical to his district's voters. He describes political office as a "phenomenal vehicle for mobilizing social work values. People look to public officials for leadership. There is a tremendous opportunity to empower people," he says.

Wayne cites a small neighborhood that turned to him for help. Development, largely sponsored by the state, had trapped families in homes now devalued by noise, pollution, and traffic. They wanted the government to buy them out and relocate them to decent neighborhoods. Rep. Wayne helped them organize and arranged for pro bono help from a large area law firm. "The neighborhood now is negotiating with two government entities," Wayne said. "And the people are very hopeful."

Wayne thinks a political career is an excellent way to practice social work. "There is so much good you can do in the public arena—so many doors can be opened for people in need. There are so many positive things that can be done."

There is a natural progression in the careers of many social workers from activism to leadership. Increasingly, social workers are holding elective offices from school boards to city and county governments, from state legislatures all the way to the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate. Some have been appointed to top posts in state and federal governments.

Many social workers relish the opportunity to make changes on a local, state, or national scale. They possess skills that make them well suited for public office and for building support for an issue.

Social workers who run for office have an important ally in NASW and its Political Action for Candidate Election (PACE) organization. PACE has been active at the federal, state, and local levels to promote candidates, including social workers, who support social work values. Social workers' skills and talents also make them valuable in the roles of political organizers or campaign managers and strategists.

For those willing to roll up their sleeves and participate in the political process, a social work degree and experience can provide them with the tools to be successful and foster positive change.

Related Areas

- Campaign management
- Community organization
- Advocacy
- Government relations
- Social policy

Employers

- Political campaigns
- Political parties
- Political organizations
- Associations
- Government agencies
- Advocacy groups

Research

The hospital social work director needs to know if the department's programs are effective, if elderly adult patients are well served, and if services needed for recovery are in place.

She commissions a research project. The social work researcher constructs a questionnaire to find out how well older sick adults are managing at home after they leave the hospital. Are the services arranged for them helping? Are they sufficient? Are more needed? Which ones? The questionnaire asks, "Do you need help with meal preparation? with medications? with toileting? with transportation for follow-up visits? with housekeeping? with paying bills on time? with home maintenance?" It inquires about frequency, convenience, and cost.

After six months, 327 former patients have responded, and the researcher tabulates the data. Results show that visiting nursing services are sufficient and a neighborhood meals program is sufficient. But many report needing more help around the house. Others say taxis are often slow to respond, making them late for follow-up visits, and the cost is too high. The director asks a local agency to coordinate teen volunteer home helpers to help with housework, maintenance, and bill paying. She negotiates with a van company to transport three or four patients on clinic days at lower cost than taxis.

One of the most absorbing roles in professional social work involves expanding the profession's knowledge. Social work researchers achieve this by investigating the effectiveness of

approaches, methods, or programs in assisting clients. Social work researchers also help agencies provide services more effectively and contribute to efforts to support and promote social change. Research points the way for improved social policies or legislation and can be the underpinning of successful social policy advocacy.

Research entails a scientific process involving quantitative and qualitative techniques. Data are collected in a variety of ways, then analyzed and reported. Problems for study may include virtually every facet of social work. Social workers may investigate the effectiveness of a particular service program or treatment approach or study broader, societal concerns.

Research tasks may include identifying a problem, organizing research projects, developing questionnaires, gathering data, performing statistical analyses, writing articles, testifying at public hearings, or presenting findings at conferences.

Many researchers begin their careers in direct services and program development, then return to a university to get a doctoral degree to pursue a research career. Others work in agencies or organizations, including federal, state, and local governments.

Social work research is a satisfying way to turn intellectual curiosity into results that contribute to the practice of social work and the betterment of life.

Related Areas

- Planning
- Policy
- Community development
- Advocacy
- Social planning
- Program development
- Economic development
- Politics

Employers

- Colleges and universities
 - Research institutes
 - Associations
 - Advocacy organizations
 - Development corporations
 - Local, state, and federal governments
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