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# Social Work Licensure: A Brief History and Description

Timothy B. Dyeson, PhD

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*This article provides a brief history of the development of social work as a profession including professional training, educational accreditation, and state licensing for professional practice. This brief history is followed by a description of the varying state licensing laws and their implications for social work practice in home health.*

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## **BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL WORK AS A PROFESSION**

The profession of social work has a long and rich history in the United States. Like most other professions today, social work was being performed by individuals and agencies long before there were training programs, practice standards, and licensing laws. Efforts to deal with poverty and other social issues can be seen in American history as far back as colonial times (Colby & Dziegielewski, 2001).

Professional social work celebrated its centennial in 1998. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2004b) Web site states, "Since the first social work class was offered in the summer of 1898 at Columbia University, social workers have led the way developing private and charitable organizations to serve people in need" (¶ 1). The number of schools of social work grew rapidly throughout the early 20th century—a time when America was being confronted with great need among its citizens. Schools of social work continued to grow in number and enrollment during the

latter half of the 20th century, as many governmental programs and nonprofit agencies were established to serve people in need. According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2004), there are now 637 accredited social work programs at the bachelor's and master's level.

As the number of social work schools grew, so did the need to formalize and standardize the curricula among these schools. The earliest coordination among schools began in 1919 when the Association of Training Schools of Professional Social Work was founded. Over the next several decades, several other organizations were created for similar purposes. Eventually, several of these organizations joined forces in 1952 to create CSWE, the nationally recognized accrediting organization for schools of social work (Kendall, 2002).

Another important step in the development of social work as a profession was the enactment of laws that govern the practice of social work. California was the first state to register social workers when, in 1945, the Board of Social Work Examiners was formed (California Board of Behavioral Sciences, 2004). Now, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have statutes that, among other things, declare who is allowed to use the title *social worker*, establish an examination board, set continuing education policies, and outline disciplinary hearing procedures. Most states refer to this process as

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*licensure*, whereas some states continue to use the term *certification*. One of the primary requirements of social work certification or licensure is that a person graduate from a bachelor's or master's program that is accredited by CSWE (NASW, 2004c).

The final component of social work developing into a profession was the establishment of a code of ethics. The NASW, founded in 1955, has been the organization responsible for creating and evolving the profession's ethical code. The preamble to the code of ethics describes the core values of the social work profession:

The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values. These core values, embraced by social workers throughout the profession's history, are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. This constellation of core values reflects what is unique to the social work profession. (NASW, 2004a, ¶ 3)

The NASW (2004a) code of ethics also states, "The *Code* is relevant to all social workers and social work students, regardless of their professional functions, the settings in which they work, or the populations they serve" (¶ 5).

## SOCIAL WORK LICENSURE BY STATE

The laws that govern social workers vary from state to state. Each state enacts a law that declares who is allowed to use the title *social worker*, establishes an examination board, sets continuing education policies, and outlines disciplinary hearing procedures. Although there are similarities in the laws between the states, there are key differences that exist that affect the provision of social work services.

One of these differences is the levels at which social workers can be licensed. Some states only license social workers who graduate from an accredited master's program, work full-time under supervised training for a required number of years (usually 2 or 3 years) after graduation, and pass the clinical examination. On the other hand, other states require that anyone working in the field of social work be registered, certified, or licensed to perform these tasks.

The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) administers the social work examination process for the United States, U.S. Territories, and Canada. There are

four examination levels that states can use in the licensing process. The basic examination is used for those with a bachelor's degree. Some states stipulate that a person must have a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW), whereas other states allow a bachelor's degree (BA/BS) in a related field (e.g., psychology or human ecology). Some states differentiate levels of licensure between the BA/BS and BSW, whereas other states group all bachelor's degrees into one level. This level of licensure generally allows the social worker to perform basic social work functions within the confines of an agency and under direct supervision of a more highly licensed social worker.

The intermediate exam is used for those who have just graduated with a master's degree in social work (MSW) and have no work experience. This level of licensure typically allows the recipient to practice more advanced social work functions including clinical social work. This level of licensure also generally requires the services to be performed within an agency setting under the direct supervision of a more highly licensed social worker.

The advanced examination is used for those who have an MSW and have 2 or 3 years (depending on the state) of supervised training. This examination is most often used for social work positions that are not clinical in nature (e.g., administrators or consultants). The social worker licensed at this level generally may practice independently and may provide supervision to less experienced social workers.

Finally, the clinical examination is used for those who have an MSW and have the required years of supervised training in clinical social work. This is the highest level of state licensure that can be obtained, and it makes one eligible to receive third-party payments (i.e., insurance) for rendered services. This level of licensure enables one to practice independently and to serve as a supervisor of less experienced social workers.

According to the ASWB (2004), three states (Massachusetts, South Dakota, Texas) have four-tier licensing of social workers. At the lowest tier of licensing, Texas requires at least a bachelor's degree in a related field, South Dakota makes allowances for an associate's degree, and Massachusetts permits a high school graduate with 8 years of experience. These are often referred to as social work associates. The other three tiers include those with BSWs, newly graduated MSWs, and MSWs with supervised training.

Twenty-six states and the District of Columbia (Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio, South Carolina, Utah, Wisconsin, and West Virginia) have three-tier licensing (ASWB, 2004). These states have designations for those with a BSW. This level of social worker is typically called a licensed social worker and is required to take the basic ASWB examination. The newly graduated MSW is often called a licensed master or licensed graduate social worker and is required to take the intermediate ASWB examination. Those with an MSW and the required years of supervised clinical training are generally called licensed clinical social workers and are required to take the clinical ASWB examination. At the highest level of licensure, some states (regardless of the tier system) recognize a difference between clinically trained social workers and those who have advanced training in other areas of practice. There are two types of examination at this level: the advanced and the clinical. The MSW who has passed the advanced examination is often referred to as a licensed certified or licensed independent social worker.

Fourteen states (California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming) have two-tier licensing (ASWB, 2004). With some exceptions, these states recognize only those who have an MSW degree. Distinctions are made between newly graduated MSWs and those with supervised training. Illinois, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Virginia recognize someone with a BSW and varying years of experience as being the same as a newly graduated MSW. Missouri distinguishes between BSWs with experience and MSWs with experience. BSWs with experience are permitted to take any of the ASWB examinations, whereas MSWs with experience are required to take the clinical examination. Wyoming recognizes only the BSW (experience not required) and the MSW with 2 years of supervised training (either advanced or clinical).

Seven states (Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Montana, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont) have only one level of licensure (ASWB, 2004). Connecticut, Delaware, and Vermont license only MSWs with supervising training and successful clinical or advanced examination. Hawaii requires only an MSW and the intermediate examination. New York allows an

MSW with either the intermediate, advanced, or clinical examinations.

### ADDITIONAL CREDENTIALS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS FROM NASW

In addition to state licensure, the NASW offers several advanced credentials and specialty certifications. The advanced credentials are the Academy of Certified Social Workers, the Qualified Clinical Social Worker, and the Diplomate in Clinical Social Work (NASW, 2004d). These credentials are available to those who have achieved high levels of specified clinical education, training, and experience.

The specialty certifications include Certified Advanced Children, Youth, and Family Social Worker (C-ACYFSW); Certified Children, Youth, and Family Social Worker (C-CYFSW); Certified Social Worker in Health Care (C-SWHC); Certified Clinical Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs Social Worker (C-CATODSW); Certified Advanced Social Work Case Manager (C-ASWCM); Certified Social Work Case Manager (C-SWCM); and Certified School Social Work Specialist (C-SSWS) (NASW, 2004d). The NASW uses the *advanced* qualifier with some of these certifications to indicate that there are BSW and MSW levels of certification (e.g., C-ACYFSW vs. C-CYFSW). If there is no *advanced* qualifier, then the specialty certification requires an MSW degree.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR HOME HEALTH CARE

The Medicare guidelines state that medical social services must be "provided by a qualified medical social worker or a social work assistant under the supervision of a qualified medical social worker" (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 1996, §206.3). The definition of being a qualified medical social worker is directly tied to the social work practice law of each state. States with one-tier licensure have only one level of qualified medical social worker: an MSW with the required years of postgraduate supervised training who has passed the ASWB clinical examination. States with multilevel licensure generally have two levels of qualified medical social workers: a newly graduated MSW who has passed the ASWB intermediate examination and an MSW with the required years of postgraduate supervised training who has passed the ASWB clinical examination. All lower levels of licensure, certification, or registration would be considered a social work

assistant and require direct supervision of a qualified medical social worker.

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