

Professional Pathways in the United States Social Work: An Overview of Education, Licensure and Supervisorship*

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abstract

This article presents an overview of the educational, licensure, and supervisory frameworks that govern professional social work practice in the United States. It delineates the requisite steps for attaining the status of both a social worker and a supervisor, emphasizing the necessity of obtaining a degree from a program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and fulfilling state-specific licensure requirements. The article further explores best practice standards in supervision, addressing legal, ethical, and technological considerations, as well as the critical roles of cultural competence and professional development. Moreover, it elucidates the contributions of key organizations, including CSWE, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), in promoting high-quality, accountable, and ethically guided practice.

Keywords: social work profession, social work education, social worker, social supervision and supervisor

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1. INTRODUCTION

The social work profession plays a fundamental role in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals, families, and communities. As a practice-oriented discipline, social work necessitates not only a robust educational foundation but also continuous professional oversight to ensure the effective delivery of services. Supervision, as a core component of social work practice, facilitates the professional development of social workers, ensures compliance with ethical standards, and contributes to the overall enhancement of service quality.

Social work practices in the United States are based on a complex set of processes and standards, ranging from professional education to licensure. This article seeks to offer a comprehensive overview of the social work profession in the United States, with particular emphasis on the role of supervision. It examines the educational prerequisites, licensure processes, and the career trajectory for becoming a social worker and supervisor. Furthermore, the article explores the established best practice standards in supervision and highlights the key professional organizations that influence and regulate the field.

2. BECOMING A SOCIAL WORKER IN THE USA

Social workers play a pivotal role in the supervision process, functioning as professionals who receive supervision, as supervisors who provide it, and as potential candidates for supervisory roles. In the United States, becoming a social worker involves successfully completing a series of rigorous and structured steps, which are outlined below.

2.1. Social Work Education in the USA

The foundational requirement for pursuing a career in social work in the United States is obtaining a degree from an accredited social work program. This typically involves earning either a bachelor's degree (BSW) or a master's degree (MSW) from a program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Importantly, graduates from non-accredited programs are not eligible to practice as social workers in the U.S. (Social Work Guide, 2024a). Thus, obtaining a degree from an accredited institution constitutes the first and most critical step in entering the social work profession.

Admission requirements for social work undergraduate programs in the U.S. often include a minimum high school GPA of 2.5/4.0, standardized test scores (such as the SAT or ACT), two academic or professional reference letters, and evidence of at least 40 hours of volunteer or paid work in human services organizations (All Psychology Schools, 2024). Undergraduate social work programs typically span four years and require students to complete at least 120 academic credits to earn a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree (Social Work Guide, 2024a). As part of these programs, students must also complete a minimum of 400 hours of supervised field practice, which is a mandatory component in all accredited programs (All Psychology Schools, 2024).

Higher education in the U.S. is fee-based, with annual tuition fees for social work programs reaching up to \$40,000. The BSW is considered the minimum qualification for entry into the profession, offering students a broad foundation in social work practice. The curriculum often covers key areas such as case management, community and program organization, utilization of community resources, and the development of essential skills including client advocacy and crisis intervention (SocialWorkLicensure.Org, 2024a).

In the United States, individuals can also pursue employment as social workers with a master's degree in social work (MSW). While the specific admission requirements for MSW programs vary by university, standard prerequisites typically include a bachelor's degree in a human services-related field such as social work, psychology, anthropology, or sociology, along with a GRE score that meets the threshold set by the institution (SocialWorkGuide.org 2024b). Completing an MSW program generally requires two years of full-time study, during which students must earn approximately 60 credits and complete a minimum of 1,000 hours of supervised field practice (All Psychology Schools 2024b). Graduates with an advanced degree in social work are qualified to work in specialized areas such as mental health, education, healthcare, and clinical settings. They may take on roles such as therapists, medical social workers, school social workers, or clinical social workers. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has projected an overall increase of 7% in the employment of social workers between the years 2023 and 2033. This clearly indicates that there is a strong demand for professionals in the field (BLS, 2024). Owing to this fact, it is possible to state that there is an increasing interest in social work education in the U.S.

At the doctoral level, the field of social work in the United States offers two distinct programs: the research-focused Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and the practice-oriented Doctor of Social Work (DSW). The DSW program is designed for professionals who wish to advance their expertise in clinical practice, while the PhD program emphasizes research and prepares individuals for academic and research-oriented careers in various institutions (SocialWorkLicensure.Org, 2024b; Social Work Degree 2024). Admission to either program typically requires a master's degree in social work from an accredited institution, a GPA ranging from 3.0 to 3.5, and a GRE score that meets the requirements of the admitting university (Social Work Guide 2024c).

2.2. Social Work Licensure

In the United States, obtaining a professional license is the next essential step after completing social work education for those pursuing a career in social work. Licensure refers to a formal process administered by a state-level authority, mandated by law, to permit an individual to practice a regulated profession (U.S. Department of Education International Affairs Office, 2024). In essence, it signifies that the licensee has met the specified professional competency standards required for practice (Hickman, 1994).

In the U.S., professions regulated by law are generally required to obtain licensure at the state level. A prerequisite for social work licensure is the attainment of a bachelor's or master's degree in social work. Similar to other regulated professions such as medicine, law, nursing, engineering, therapy, and psychology, social workers must acquire state-specific licenses for legal practice (CareerOneStop.Org, 2024).

Licensure differs from certification and registration in several ways. Licensure typically entails stricter requirements and confers higher professional status. While licensure is mandatory for social workers in the U.S., certification and registration are optional in many states. Additionally, holding a license obligates the individual to adhere to a professional code of ethics or conduct. Violations of these standards can result in disciplinary actions, including sanctions or the revocation of licensure (Hickman, 1994).

In the United States, a social work license is required not only to practice the profession but also to use the title of "social worker" (Munday, 2023; New Jersey Administrative Code, 1991). Licenses are issued at the state level and are valid exclusively within the state where they are obtained. The general requirements for state licensure typically include graduation from a program accredited by

the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and successful completion of the social work licensure examination administered by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) (Munday, 2023).

For instance, in New Jersey, the Social Workers' Licensing Act of 1991 led to the establishment of the New Jersey State Board of Social Work Examiners (BSWE) (New Jersey Administrative Code, 1991). This board is tasked with protecting the quality of social work services in New Jersey by setting the educational, training, and experience standards necessary for individuals to be certified or licensed as social workers within the state (New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs, 2024). The board grants licenses in three categories, issuing certificates to individuals with a bachelor's degree and licenses to those holding a master's or doctoral degree in social work (New Jersey Administrative Code, 1991; New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs, 2024).

(i) Certified Social Worker (CSW): The foundational requirement for obtaining this certification is a bachelor's degree in social work from a higher education program accredited, or in the process of being accredited, by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (Social Work Guide, 2024d). Social workers with CSW certification are qualified to provide services such as assessment, consultation and counseling, planning and community organization, policy and research, management, and client-centered advocacy (New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs, 2024).

(ii) Licensed Social Worker (LSW): This licensure requires a master's or doctoral degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited or candidate program, in addition to passing the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) exam tailored for individuals with a master's degree but no prior experience (Social Work Guide, 2024e). LSWs are authorized to deliver all services allowed under CSW certification, as well as clinical social services under the supervision of a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) (New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs, 2024).

(iii) Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW): To obtain this licensure, candidates must hold a master's or doctoral degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited or candidate program, complete two years or 3,000 hours of clinical social work under LCSW supervision, and pass the ASWB Clinical Exam (NASW-New Jersey Chapter, 2024a). In New Jersey, LCSW candidates are required to hold an LSW license during their supervised clinical work. Supervisors must have at least three years of licensure as an LCSW and must have completed 20 hours of continuing education in supervision. Candidates must receive a minimum of one hour of supervision per week throughout their clinical practice.

Of the required 3,000 supervised hours, 1,920 hours must involve direct client services, with 960 of those hours focused on providing psychotherapeutic counseling. The supervised clinical experience must be completed within a minimum of two years and a maximum of four years. Upon fulfilling the clinical experience requirement, candidates must apply to the New Jersey Board of Social Work Examiners (BSWE) for approval and subsequently pass the ASWB Clinical Exam (Social Work Guide, 2024f). Social workers with LCSW licensure are authorized to provide clinical supervision in addition to all the services specified for CSW and LSW (New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs, 2024).

In the U.S., all social workers are required to renew their licenses biennially (New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs, 2024). Each level of licensure and certification has distinct continuing education (CE) requirements. All social workers must complete five hours of ethics three hours of

competency training in socio-cultural issues. CSWs must complete 20 hours, LSWs 30 hours, and LCSWs 40 hours of CE during each renewal period (Social Work Guide, 2024f).

3. BECOMING A SUPERVISOR IN THE USA

The journey to becoming a supervisor in the field of social work is shaped by a combination of personal, professional, and organizational factors. In the United States, the qualifications for becoming a social work supervisor are defined by licensing rules and regulatory standards within each state's jurisdiction. These standards may vary by level of social work practice or may apply universally across all levels.

According to the NASW (National Association of Social Workers) and ASWB (Association of Social Work Boards) Best Practice Standards for Social Work Supervision, the general criteria for becoming a supervisor include (NASW & ASWB, 2013):

1. Valid licensure to practice in the jurisdiction (state) where both the supervisor and supervisee operate, at or above the level at which supervision will be provided.
2. A degree from an accredited school of social work.
3. Completion of the minimum number of continuing education hours in supervision practice, as determined by the jurisdiction.
4. At least three years of post-licensure practice experience, or more if specified by licensing laws.
5. Completion of continuing education hours necessary to maintain the validity of the supervision certification.
6. No disciplinary sanctions from the licensing board, including disqualifications, fines, or other penalties for professional violations.

While these criteria are broadly applicable, specific requirements may vary by state. For example, in New Jersey, the qualifications for becoming a supervisor include:

1. Holding a valid New Jersey LCSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker) license.
2. Having three years of clinical experience post-LCSW licensure.
3. Maintaining an LCSW license in good standing (e.g., free of disciplinary actions) (SocialWorkSupervisor.com, 2024).
4. Completing a minimum of 20 continuing post-graduate education credits in clinical supervision (NASW-New Jersey Chapter, 2024b).

Professional development activities—such as courses, workshops, and conferences on supervision offered by professional organizations or universities—facilitate the transition to a supervisory role and are often undertaken during the licensing period (Study.Com, 2024).

In summary, the criteria for becoming a social work supervisor in the United States typically include earning a degree from an accredited social work program, obtaining a state-level license, acquiring substantial post-licensure field experience, and engaging in ongoing professional development, particularly in supervision-related education. These qualifications ensure that supervisors are well-equipped to oversee and guide professional practice in the field of social work.

4. BEST PRACTICE STANDARDS IN SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION

While regional laws governing social work supervision and supervisor qualifications vary due to the federal structure of the United States, the Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision¹, developed by two prominent professional organizations, the NASW (National Association of Social Workers) and the ASWB (Association of Social Work Boards), have established a national framework for standardized supervision practices across the country (NASW and ASBW, 2013). These standards outline five key areas of focus: the content of supervision, supervision management, legal and regulatory considerations, ethical issues, and the use of technology in supervision (NASW and ASBW, 2013). Additionally, the standards address important aspects such as the definition of supervision, the supervision process, the qualifications required for supervisors, the evaluation of supervision, and the termination of the supervision process.

The first standard, context in supervision, focuses on the foundational context in which supervision occurs. It emphasizes that supervisors must possess the requisite qualifications and a clear understanding of the knowledge and skills necessary to support the professional development of supervisees effectively. The standard highlights the unique challenges faced by social workers who often practice within the social environments in which they reside. This proximity can result in dual or multiple relationships; therefore, supervisors are tasked with ensuring that the professional relationship remains paramount and safeguarded in all circumstances. In the context of interdisciplinary supervision, particularly within teams comprising professionals from various disciplines, the standard underscores that social workers should receive supervision from someone within their own profession. Similarly, professionals from other disciplines should be matched with supervisors who share their specific field of expertise. Cultural awareness and cross-cultural supervision are also addressed. According to the NASW Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice², social work supervisors must be able to convey knowledge about diverse client groups and guide supervisees in employing culturally appropriate methodologies, skills, and techniques in their practice. Lastly, the standard provides guidance on dual supervision and potential conflicts that may arise when administrative and clinical supervision are handled by different individuals. It emphasizes the importance of contractual agreements to define roles and processes clearly. In the absence of such agreements, the hiring manager retains ultimate decision-making authority.

The second standard, conduct of supervision, addresses the effective management of the supervision process. It highlights that the proper guidance of supervisees is contingent upon the skills and expertise of supervisors. A respect-based approach between supervisors and supervisees is deemed essential for a successful supervision process. With respect to confidentiality, the standard mandates that supervisors ensure the confidentiality of all client information, except in cases where legal obligations require disclosure. Supervisors and supervisees are also required to establish a written contract that outlines the terms of the supervision relationship. Supervisors play a critical role in the professional development of supervisees and are responsible for creating a conducive learning environment. In terms of competence, the standard underscores the importance of supervisors engaging in continuous self-improvement, staying informed about advancements in social work practice, and integrating evidence-based practices into the supervision process.

¹ The Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision can be accessed from:
<https://www.aswb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/standards-social-work-supervision.pdf>

² The NASW Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice can be accessed from:
<https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=7dVckZAYUmk%3D&portalid=0>

Regarding the termination of paid supervision, supervisors are advised to request payment solely for services rendered. Both supervisors and supervisees are expected to be knowledgeable about the legislation governing this issue in their respective jurisdictions. The standard also emphasizes the need for supervisors to recognize and address signs of work stress in supervisees. Supervisors are encouraged to prioritize self-care by collaborating with supervisees to identify stressors, providing appropriate resources, and making external referrals when necessary. This proactive approach ensures that supervisees receive the support they need to maintain their professional well-being.

The third standard, which focuses on legal and regulatory issues, addresses the legal responsibilities and liabilities of social work supervisors. According to this standard, the courts determine the extent of a supervisor's liability, holding them directly liable for negligent or inadequate supervision and vicariously liable for the negligent conduct of their supervisees. In terms of liability, the standard notes that a supervisor may be held directly responsible if they provide inappropriate advice that ultimately harms the client.

Regarding legislative considerations, the standard emphasizes that laws and regulations governing supervisor qualifications vary by jurisdiction. Consequently, both supervisors and supervisees are responsible for ensuring that supervisory arrangements meet the specific legal requirements of their respective regions. In many states, for example, legislation mandates that all supervision must be provided by a licensed clinical social worker.

The standard also highlights the importance of documentation as a legal safeguard. Each supervision session should be documented by both the supervisor and the supervisee, and this documentation should be provided to the supervisee within a reasonable time frame. All records must be kept confidential and securely protected. Furthermore, the standard notes that experienced social workers who seek to develop new areas of specialization may face constraints in supervision, as they may be assigned a supervisor based solely on their existing specialization. In such situations, establishing a supervision contract or plan outlining the roles, responsibilities, and obligations of all parties is recommended.

In cases where supervision is mandated following disciplinary action, the standard advises that an agreement be developed between the supervisor, the supervisee, and any relevant authorities. This agreement should define issues such as corrective measures, the scope of information sharing, and the required frequency of supervision sessions. Finally, when conflicts arise or when specialized consultation is necessary, the standard recognizes that social work supervisors may hire external consultants for case consultation and review.

The fourth standard emphasizes ethical considerations in social work supervision. It recognizes that both supervisors and supervisees may encounter ethical dilemmas in their practice and underscores the necessity of a comprehensive understanding of relevant ethical codes to address these challenges. In this context, the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) serves as a foundational guide for supervisors navigating ethical issues within supervisory relationships. Specifically, the NASW Code of Ethics provides directives for supervisory practice under standards 3.0.1(a) through 3.0.1(d). These standards advise that supervisors possess the requisite knowledge and skills for their supervisory roles, refrain from exceeding their areas of expertise, set clear and appropriate professional boundaries, and conduct fair and respectful evaluations of supervisees. Moreover, the Code emphasizes that supervisors should aid supervisees in developing ethical decision-making skills as both cognitive and emotional processes. The supervision process offers a valuable opportunity for educating supervisees about maintaining professional boundaries.

Supervisors are encouraged to teach supervisees about the nature of professional responsibility, the importance of establishing and respecting boundaries, and the ethical obligations involved in responding to inadequate or unethical situations. Regarding self-disclosure, supervisors should be judicious, ensuring that any personal information shared remains brief and directly supports the goals of supervision. Supervisors also bear responsibility for addressing workplace safety concerns. They should inform supervisees about potential risks and provide guidance on responding to conflicts, threats, and harassment, as well as strategies for safeguarding property and managing assaults and their emotional consequences. Additionally, when alternative practices—non-traditional social work interventions—are considered, the supervisor must determine their appropriateness for the client's treatment. Supervisors should either possess or acquire the necessary expertise to ensure that the supervisee is properly trained and knowledgeable in the chosen method. In instances where the supervisor does not have the requisite skills, involving a secondary supervisor with relevant expertise may be necessary. In such cases, both supervisors should work collaboratively to prevent conflicts and ensure that the alternative practice is implemented effectively for the benefit of the client.

The fifth and final standard addresses the use of technology in supervision. It stipulates that when incorporating technological tools into supervision, supervisors and supervisees should adhere to the same standards that govern face-to-face supervisory relationships. The standard also emphasizes the importance of supervisors possessing competence in the use of technology and remaining informed about emerging technological developments.

In discussing remote supervision, the standard acknowledges the increasing reliance on electronic tools and notes that jurisdictions differ in their regulations. Some allow for electronic forms of supervision, while others limit how much supervision may be delivered remotely. Supervisors utilizing technology for remote supervision should be well-versed in standards of best practice and fully aware of the legal frameworks governing these services.

Regarding risk management, the standard highlights that employing technology in supervision carries inherent risks. Supervisors are therefore obligated to ensure that the learning process aligns with the NASW Code of Ethics, NASW and ASWB Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice, the Canadian Code of Ethics for Social Workers, as well as relevant licensing laws and agency policies.

Overall, these standards offer a comprehensive framework designed to promote national consistency in supervision practices across the United States. They serve as a valuable resource guiding both supervisors and supervisees through the ethical, legal, and technological dimensions of social work supervision.

5. PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN SOCIAL WORK WITHIN THE USA

This section provides an overview of several key organizations that significantly influence social work education and professional practice in the United States.

5.1. Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)

Established in 1952, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) serves as the national association representing social work education in the United States (Council of Social Work

Education, 2024). Its membership comprises more than 900 accredited baccalaureate and master's level social work programs, as well as individual educators, practitioners, and related organizations. The Commission on Accreditation within CSWE is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation as the sole accrediting agency for social work education in the United States and its territories. As such, the Council's role is strategically central to the academic standards and quality assurance of social work education nationwide.

5.2. National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) represents over 145,000 members, including professionals working across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, Puerto Rico, and abroad (National Association of Social Workers, 2024). NASW is the largest professional organization in the field of social work worldwide. Its primary mission is to enhance the professional growth and development of its members, uphold and advance professional standards, and promote robust social policies that contribute to social justice and community well-being.

5.3. Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB)

The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) is a nonprofit organization that includes social work regulatory boards and universities from all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and 10 Canadian provinces (ASWB, 2024). ASWB's mission is to strengthen public protection by supporting the social work regulatory community. Through providing services and resources, ASWB advances competent and ethical practice within the profession, ensuring that both the public and practitioners benefit from high-quality regulatory standards.

6. CONCLUSION

In the United States, the process of becoming a professional social worker and subsequently advancing into supervisory roles is anchored by a comprehensive framework that integrates accredited education, licensure, and adherence to established best practice standards. Obtaining a degree from a CSWE -accredited program ensures that emerging practitioners possess the requisite theoretical and practical competencies. State-specific licensure requirements further safeguard the public by validating the practitioner's professional qualification and commitment to ethical practice. Meanwhile, professional organizations such as the NASW and the ASWB provide essential guidance and regulatory oversight, thereby fostering a consistent and culturally responsive supervisory environment. Collectively, these interconnected structures ensure that social workers and their supervisors are both well-prepared and accountable, ultimately enhancing the quality and integrity of services provided to diverse client populations.

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