The Profession of Social Work

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 most recent figures, in 2002 social workers held about 477,000 jobs. According to the Bureau, employment of social workers is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2012. The rapidly growing elderly population and the aging baby boom generation will create greater demand for health and social services, resulting in particularly rapid job growth among gerontology social workers.

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.

Careers in Social Work

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- For information about state licensing of social work, contact the Association of Social Work Boards at www.aswb.org

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