

Abstract of the Position Statement on Professional Development and Practice Competencies in Clinical Social Work

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Introduction

The full paper (available at the abecsw.org website under “publications”) describes standards for the competent practice of advanced-generalist clinical social work. Clinical social workers provide more mental-emotional healthcare than any other professional group in the United States.

The American Board of Examiners in Clinical Social Work (ABE), which first published this paper in 1995, published a second edition (in March, 2002), updated and reorganized, with a bibliography and greater emphasis on clinical practice rather than generic social work. ABE is an operating unit of the Center for Clinical Social Work. The drafts of the paper were enriched by the comments of 67 distinguished clinical social work practitioners, educators, clinical supervisors, program administrators, and leaders of professional organizations.

Objectives

The paper addresses large issues such as the nature of clinical social work and the ways in which clinical social workers improve their skills; and it has the following main objectives:

- to identify the practice components of clinical social work
- to relate professional development to practice competency
- to identify the indicators by which clinical social workers may be recognized as having achieved certain levels of proficiency.

Proficiency at Three Levels of Practice

In this paper, three levels of professional development are examined in terms of expectations about practice competency:

- (1) post-graduate or entry level: the period (usually two years) after obtaining the master’s degree, in which clinical supervision is mandatory under state clinical license laws;
- (2) autonomous or intermediate level: a period (usually three years) in which the clinician broadens the range and raises the skill level of his/her practice, and seeks improvement through clinical supervision or consultation;
- (3) advanced level: the period (generally beginning at about five years postmaster’s) in which clinical social workers develop proficiency in certain

practice specialties to the point that they are practicing as experts.

In order to show which activities are indicative of competence at each of these three developmental levels, major clinical skills (assessment, treatment planning, intervention, evaluation) are described in relation to each of five dimensions (values, knowledge, identity and use of self, disciplined approach, and practice skills). Thus the reader is given a well-rounded portrait of the competent clinical social worker at each phase of his/her professional development.

Other Issues

The paper addresses other state-of-the-profession issues, as follows:

- The evolving practice environment
- Opportunities for generalist practice preparation
- Defining specialized areas in clinical social work practice
- Clinical content in graduate education
- Re-establishing standards for clinical supervision
- Practice research as an aspect of clinical social work practice
- Professional standards and legal regulation of practice.

Relevance and Usefulness

This paper served as the conceptual model for ABE's developing professional standards for certification, incorporated into its current evaluation-based process for examining candidates for national board-certification in clinical social work. In addition to serving as the touchstone for the development of professional standards, and as the framework by which clinical social workers may be reviewed for competency at each level of their development, this paper is useful to:

- clients and other users of services seeking information about what makes a clinician competent;
- administrators and program planners seeking greater clarity in what they can expect from the clinical social workers they employ;
- licensing and regulatory agencies to assist in defining scope of practice, examination criteria and adjudicating complaints;
- clinical social workers seeking to set career milestones and improve their professional development;
- social work educators and curriculum planners seeking to assure that what is being taught is relevant to the demands and needs of clinical practice;
- clinical supervisors seeking a context for guiding and evaluating the practice of their supervisees;
- the social work profession for the purpose of clarifying the mission of clinical social work and the practice of clinical social workers.