Social Worker

Overview

Social workers are a diverse group of skilled professionals who help people function as best they can, given the challenges of their personal situation or environment. They assist individuals, groups, or communities to restore or enhance their capacity for social functioning. The approach to care is oriented toward problem-solving and promoting positive social change.

Professional social workers respond to and help prevent crises, and they counsel individuals, families, and communities on how to cope with the stresses of everyday life. Social workers frequently work with people with socio-economic disadvantages, including severe poverty, unemployment, discrimination, or inadequate housing. They also help people who have serious illness, disabilities, or substance abuse problems, as well as families with serious domestic conflicts, sometimes involving child or spousal abuse.

There are various types of social workers, including:

- Child, Family, and School Social Workers
- Medical and Public Health Social Workers
- Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW)

Social workers' responsibilities often overlap with those of other practitioners in the mental health field. LCSWs have special training in mental illness, but their scope of practice is narrower than it is for such other mental health professionals as psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, or psychologists, who hold advanced practice degrees.

To be effective, social workers must have deep understanding of human development and behavior. They also must have an appreciation for the effects of various social, economic and cultural factors, and an understanding of how these factors interact.

Working Conditions

Full-time social workers usually work a standard 40-hour week; however, some occasionally work evenings and weekends to meet with clients, attend community meetings, and handle emergencies. Some, particularly in voluntary nonprofit agencies, work part time.

Social workers usually spend most of their time in an office or residential facility, but also may travel locally to visit clients, meet with service providers, or attend meetings. Some may use one of several offices within a local area in which to meet with clients.

Professional social workers are found in schools, hospitals, mental health clinics, senior centers, elected office, private practices, prisons, corporations, the military, and numerous public and private agencies. They usually specialize in one or more of over 40 practice areas - including Disaster Relief, Child Welfare Services, Homeless Family Assistance, and Gerontology Services, among many others.

The work, while satisfying, can be emotionally draining. Understaffing and large caseloads add to the pressure in some agencies. To tend to patient care or client needs, many hospitals and long-term care facilities are employing social workers on teams with a broad mix of occupations, including clinical specialists, registered nurses, and health aides.

Academic Requirements

A bachelor’s degree in social work (BSW) is the minimum requirement to qualify for most jobs. Clinical positions and some jobs in public or private agencies typically require a master’s degree (MSW), as do most supervisory, administrative, and staff training positions. College/university teaching positions and most research appointments
require a doctorate in social work (DSW or Ph.D.). For a listing of accredited social work programs, see the Council on Social Work Education (http://www.cswe.org/) website.

Undergraduate social work programs prepare graduates for direct service positions, such as caseworker, and include courses in social work values and ethics, dealing with a culturally diverse clientele, at-risk populations, promotion of social and economic justice, human behavior and the social environment, social welfare policy and services, social work practice, social research methods, and field education. Accredited BSW programs require a minimum of 400 hours of supervised field experience.

Master’s degree programs prepare graduates for work in their chosen field of concentration and continue to develop the skills required to perform clinical assessments, manage large caseloads, take on supervisory roles, and explore new ways of drawing upon social services to meet the needs of clients. MSW programs last 2 years and include a minimum of 900 hours of supervised field instruction, or internship. Most MSW programs offer advanced standing for those with a bachelor’s degree from an accredited social work program, but a BSW is not required. For MSW applicants holding a bachelor’s degree in another field, it is important to have taken courses in psychology, biology, sociology, economics, political science, and social work. Facility with a second language also is very helpful.

All states and the District of Columbia have licensing, certification, or registration requirements regarding social work practice and the use of professional titles. Although standards for licensing vary by state, a growing number of states are placing greater emphasis on communications skills, professional ethics, and sensitivity to cultural diversity issues. Most states require two years (3,000 hours) of supervised clinical experience for consideration as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

In addition, the National Association of Social Workers (http://www.naswdc.org/) (NASW) offers voluntary credentials. Social workers with an MSW may be eligible for the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW), the Qualified Clinical Social Worker (QCSW), or the Diplomate in Clinical Social Work (DCSW) credential, based on their professional experience.

Credentials are particularly important for those in private practice; some health insurance providers require social workers to have them in order to be reimbursed for services.

Professional Associations
National Association of Social Workers (http://www.naswdc.org/) (NASW)

Funding Opportunities
Search for funding opportunities in this field (http://www.explorehealthcareers.org)

Enrichment Programs
Search for enrichment programs in this field (http://www.explorehealthcareers.org)

Source
www.bls.gov

Learn more about this field:
Mental Health (http://www.explorehealthcareers.com/en/Field.17.aspx)

Salary: $29,100 - $49,500
Years in school: 4 - 10 *
Job outlook: Excellent
* after high school graduation