

Society for Social Work Leadership in Health Care

Standards for Social Work Practice and Staffing

in Children’s Hospitals©

Background

The purpose of this document is to set out standards applicable to the practice of social work within children’s hospitals. The standards have been developed by the Society for Social Work Leadership in Health Care (SSWLHC) and are based on statutory requirements, mandated by the California Children’s Service Act. The standards also reflect a consensus among experienced social work clinicians in children’s hospitals.

The diagnosis of a serious childhood physical and/or mental health condition or disability can create a crisis for the entire family and may overwhelm a family’s ability to cope. In turn, this can adversely affect the processes of care, adherence and recovery, often resulting in less than optimal health outcomes for the child. Each health condition or disability has its own trajectory and associated challenges for children and their families. Many families face added struggles related to family conflict or hardships associated with the broader social determinants of health, such as poverty, inadequate housing, precarious employment and social exclusion based on race, culture, language and sexual orientation. Social workers play a key role in assisting families in adjusting to the care needed for children with a health condition and in addressing barriers to care that may limit effective recovery.

Social Work Knowledge Base

Social workers, because of their training and experience, are experts at understanding a child’s health condition within the social context in which it is embedded. Attention to the child’s emotional, behavioral and interpreted meaning of the condition is assessed within the context of the family and the broader systems in which the child and family live. In this way, social workers are experts in the “bio-psychosocial” dimensions of care, which have been identified as essential components of caring for a child with a health condition.

In order to bring the requisite knowledge and clinical skills to their work with children and families, social workers in children’s hospitals require comprehensive, on-going training. In addition to understanding the psychosocial impact of illness on children and their families, social workers have expertise in understanding important related dimensions of care such as grief and bereavement, processes of adaptation, community-based services and resources, and child maltreatment and neglect.

Social workers in children’s hospitals provide a broad range of clinical interventions to patients and their families. Depending on the bio-psychosocial assessment and the nature of the child’s condition,

interventions may range from brief, solution-focused interventions to more intensive therapy. Clinical interventions are evidence-based, where sufficient research exists. While social workers in children's hospitals work with all families experiencing challenges associated with caring for a child with a health condition, they bring a particular expertise to working with vulnerable populations, who often require more intensive advocacy, education and coaching, to maximize health outcomes.

Standard 1: Social Work Qualifications, Competencies and Professional Development

Qualifications:

A Master's Degree from a university accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is required for social workers practicing in children's hospitals. In addition, they must be licensed by the state/province in which they practice, to provide protection to consumers of social work services.

Supervision:

It is recommended that social workers be directly supervised by social workers with the appropriate credentials, expertise, and experience. Hospital accreditation standards support this recommendation. According to the 2011 Joint Commission Standard HR.01.06.01, EP3, "An individual with the educational background, experience, or knowledge related to the skills being reviewed assesses competence." According to the Joint Commission guidelines, when a suitable individual cannot be found to assess staff competence, the hospital can utilize an outside individual for this task. Alternatively, the hospital may consult the competency guidelines from an appropriate professional organization to make its assessments.

Professional development:

Continued professional growth and knowledge/skill development are recognized as vital to maintaining high standards of social work practice in children's hospitals. Support for continuing education opportunities should be inherent in any high performing children's hospital social work department.

Standard 2: Appropriate Social Work Staffing Levels

Within children's hospitals, social work inpatient staffing ratios should meet the following guidelines¹:

¹ Adapted from California Code of Regulations (CCR), Title 22, Division 5. *California Children's Services Manual of Procedures: Provider Standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/ccs/Pages/ProviderStandards.aspx>

- 1 social worker per 25 general pediatrics beds
- 1 social worker per 20 pediatric intensive care beds
- 1 social worker per 15 neonatal intensive care beds
- 1 social worker per 6 pediatric psychiatric beds
- 24 hour social work coverage in the Emergency Department (on-call for nights)

Standard 3: Social Work Availability

Within children's hospitals, social work services should be available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, to ensure that urgent and emergent psychosocial and behavioral health assessment and intervention is available to patients, families and other members of the health care team. This can be accomplished by having dedicated, on-site social work staffing and through an on-call service for nights.

Standard 4: Cultural and Linguistic Competence

Social workers practicing in children's hospitals must provide and facilitate access to culturally and linguistically appropriate services, consistent with the *NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* (2001) and the *NASW Indicators for the Achievement of The NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* (2007).

Standard 5: Ethics and Values

Social workers practicing in children's hospitals must adhere to and promote the ethics and values of the social work profession, using *the NASW Code of Ethics* (2008) as a guide to ethical decision making.

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