



PRACTICE STANDARDS for Social Workers: Supervision

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Developed by the Standing Committee on Professional Supervision
of the Victorian Branch of the AASW

PRACTICE STANDARDS

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Practice Standards for Social Workers: Supervision

Endorsed by the AASW Board of Directors as National Standards of the Australian Association of Social Workers in 1993, after operating as Victorian Standards since 1988.

These standards were originally developed by the Standing Committee on Professional Supervision of the Victorian Branch of the AASW, which was established in 1985.

Those responsible for the development of the standards were the original members of the Committee – Dorothy Scott (Convenor), Sandra Peeters, Ann Pilcher, Susan Lewis, Frances Thorsen and Endoxia Rovinson.

Australian Association of Social Workers
ABN 93 008 576 010
Level 4, 33–35 Ainslie Place
Canberra ACT 2601
[Postal address: Po Box 4956, Kingston ACT 2604]
Tel: (02) 6232 3900
Fax: (02) 6230 4399
Email: aaswnat@asw.asn.au
Website: www.asw.asn.au

Design and layout: Karen Silsby

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Introduction

We believe that the quality of social work supervision is central to the development and maintenance of high standards of social work practice. The primary purpose of professional supervision is to facilitate competent, independent practice and not to perpetuate dependency.

The word supervision has a specific meaning in the social work profession going far beyond the concept of line management in administration and management.

Supervision requires mediation between the organisation and the worker, with the supervisor being an advocate on behalf of the organisation, the worker, and the social work profession.

Supervision is broader than the concept of consultation as it encompasses hierarchical administrative responsibility, which is part and parcel of social work as it is practised in an organisational context. While supervision and consultation differ in this regard, these recommended standards should apply to both supervision and consultation.

Supervision is most effective when it is valued by both the supervisor and supervisee, when both parties are motivated and able to give it a high priority, and where there is recognition of the rights and needs of the supervisee as an adult learner.

Social work supervision encompasses administrative, educational, and supportive functions, all of which are interrelated.

Administration

This is a management function which includes: the clarification of roles; the planning and assignment of work; the review and assessment of work; and accountability and responsibility for supervisee's work.

Education

This involves the provision of knowledge and skills, which are the worker's necessary equipment for effective practice. It includes the development of self-awareness of the social

worker in relation to his/her work. Educational supervision is a core component in the professional development of the worker.

Supervision can also be seen as a potential vehicle for building the knowledge base of the social work profession, through conceptualising the practice experience of social workers. By reflecting on the similarities and differences, presenting characteristics, the nature of the intervention and the outcomes, propositions can be generated from 'practice wisdom' which may lead to the development of 'practice theory'.

Support

The support function of supervision is concerned with helping the supervisee deal with job-related stress, and with developing attitudes and feelings conducive to maximum job performance. It helps sustain worker morale, gives the supervisee a sense of professional self worth, and a feeling of belonging in the agency.

Social work supervision is thus important for meeting the needs of:

- the agency for ensuring accountability for its standards of service;
- the social work profession for the maintenance and enhancement of professional ethics and standards of practice; and
- the social work practitioner for professional development.

Organisational Standards

Standard 1

Supervision should meet the needs of the supervisee within the organisation for administrative, educational and supportive supervision.

Rationale

Unless this is specified, supervision may be reduced to serving only one function, such as the administrative component, and so act only as a management tool, and not fulfil its other functions.

Operationalisation

There should be a written supervision agreement which includes long term professional development objectives and should be mutually negotiated and periodically reviewed by the supervisor and supervisee. A process for appraisal and accountability of the supervisor, appropriate to the nature of the agency, should also be developed. While the criteria for appraising supervision will differ between agency settings and types of social work practice, the following includes some possible criteria suitable for supervision in direct practice:

- Is the supervisee's workload monitored?
- Is the supervisee's written work reviewed?
- Is the process of intervention discussed?
- Are the outcomes for clients discussed?
- Is the complexity of ethical issues implied in practice considered?
- Is there discussion of the working relationships within the multidisciplinary team, among social work colleagues and within the agency as a whole?
- Are issues related to the supervisee's role and professional identity discussed?
- Is morale discussed?

- Is the supervisee's particular learning style identified and utilised in supervision?
- Are the supervisee's long term professional development needs addressed in supervision?

Standard 2

The duty statement of a social work position entailing supervisory responsibilities, should provide recognition of such responsibility in relation to allocation of time, accountability and lines of authority. Duty statements should be periodically reviewed and assessed in regard to the feasibility of carrying out the specified duties.

Rationale

Unless the necessary resources, accountability and authority are provided, adequate supervision is unlikely to occur, as supervision will become a low priority under conditions of resource scarcity.

Operationalisation

The time fraction required for the supervision of each supervisee should be calculated (including time for preparation and evaluation) and the other responsibilities of the supervisor should be adjusted accordingly. The lines of authority between supervisor and supervisee should be clearly stated.

Standard 3

The agency should provide opportunities for the further development of the supervisor's knowledge and skills in relation to supervision.

Rationale

The quality of supervision is dependent on the supervisory capacity of the supervisor as well as his/her practice expertise.

Operationalisation

The agency should enable the supervisor to attend seminars and conferences relating to supervision and this should be included in any existing budget for staff development, conference leave etc.

Standard 4

Agencies should develop an appropriate mechanism to assess and negotiate situations in which the supervisor-supervisee relationship is in difficulty.

(Conflict resolution will be enhanced if the above standards relating to clarity of duty statements, supervision agreements and appraisal of supervision have been achieved).

Rationale

Unless conflict can be resolved supervision will not be successful in achieving its objectives.

Operationalisation

Procedures for dealing with a potential conflict which cannot be directly resolved between the supervisor and supervisee should be developed based on appropriate conflict resolution models, and this should be specified in the supervision agreement. For example, the supervisor and supervisee could select a mutually acceptable colleague (of at least equal status to the supervisor) to mediate.

If this fails, a mutually acceptable consultant external to the organisation could be approached by senior personnel in the agency to mediate and/or review the possible structural sources of the conflict which are being expressed in the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

Ultimately, of course, it may be necessary for agency management to arbitrate in relation to this conflict.

Supervisor Standards

Standard 1

The supervisor should be a qualified social worker eligible for membership of the AASW and have at least two years practice experience, preferably in a relevant field of practice (but not necessarily in the particular sub-field) or have had supervisory experience in another field.

The term 'field' used here refers to a broad client population and service system, such as 'child welfare' or 'health'. Specialized 'sub-fields' are the specific areas which constitute the broad 'field', such as 'protective services' or 'foster care' in child welfare, or 'medical social work' or 'rehabilitation' in health.

(It should be recognised that where a supervisor does not meet these standards they will require a high level of support in carrying out their supervisory duties).

AND

Standard 2

The supervisor should have undergone some basic training in fieldwork supervision of social work students and have had some experience in student supervision.

OR

Standard 3

The supervisor should have successfully completed an approved course in social work supervision of a minimum of 30 hours duration.

OR

Standard 4

The supervisor should have undergone post-basic training in a field of practice or method of intervention relevant to the supervisee's practice, for example, a higher degree in social work, or specialist training in a field or method.

Rationale

Supervisors should have a higher level of practice experience than their supervisees and have had some training in supervision. It is unlikely that a person would be able to acquire and integrate the complexity of social work theory and practice, without at least three to five years experience.

Minimum Supervision Standards at different levels of experience

Standard 1

Recent graduates (less than three years full-time experience) should receive the equivalent of weekly individual supervision of at least one uninterrupted hour.

The form of the supervision may vary according to the characteristics of the agency and practice situation. For example, it may include 'in vivo' supervision or group supervision led by a senior colleague who meets the requirements of the preceding section.

If group supervision is used, the focus should remain on the specific practice of the supervisee, and the size of the group and its duration should be such that recent graduates still receive the equivalent of one hour weekly individual supervision (for example, fortnightly individual supervision and fortnightly group supervision totalling one hour per individual per week).

Attendance at staff meetings, in-service training, and workshops or seminars, while constituting valuable sources of professional development, are not acceptable substitutes for supervision.

Rationale

Recent graduates have a particularly high need for supervision in order to: consolidate the knowledge and skills attained in their social work course; successfully manage the stress related to assuming the responsibilities of a social work position; and be adequately prepared for becoming a supervisor themselves.

Operationalisation

Supervision programs for recent graduates need to be tailored to the specific practice context. An excellent example of the development and implementation of a structured supervision program in a hospital setting is provided by Rosalie Pockett in a paper entitled, 'New

Graduate Social Workers: Mutual Expectations in Employment', Australian Social Work, 1987, 40,1.

Standard 2

Social workers with three or more years full-time experience should have the equivalent of fortnightly individual supervision of at least one uninterrupted hour. If peer supervision is chosen, responsibility for accountability and review should remain the duty of the occupant of a senior position.

Rationale

Experienced social workers also need and have a right to expect an opportunity to formally use social work colleagues as a 'sounding board' for consultation and reflection upon their own practice.

On occasions it may be appropriate for an experienced social worker to use the expertise of consultants of other professions/disciplines to further their own professional development goals.

Nevertheless, supervision by social workers should be an integral and ongoing part of the professional practice of even the most experienced social workers, regardless of field or speciality.

If peer supervision is to be effective it is necessary that members be sufficiently experienced to know their own limitations as well as be able to share their strengths.

Alternatives in the absence of agency resources

In situations in which these standards of supervision cannot be met within the agency, the agency should provide equivalent supervision or consultation opportunities. These may include:

- formal interagency arrangements;
- employment of a social work consultant on a sessional basis to provide educational and supportive supervision (administrative supervision remains a management responsibility);
- external private consultation funded in part or whole by the agency (at least time in lieu for travelling and attendance). Where the person providing the consultation is paid by the agency, issues of accountability, confidentiality and other possible ethical dilemmas need to be anticipated and clarified between all three parties (the agency, the consultant and the social worker).

Where a social worker chooses to independently seek private consultation, issues of accountability, confidentiality, and other possible ethical dilemmas need to be anticipated and clarified between the social worker and the consultant.

The AASW *Code of Ethics* may need to be consulted in some situations.

Conclusion

The aim of this document was to develop a set of recommended standards. It has clarified the responsibility of the agency, the worker and the supervisor in relation to professional supervision.

Supervision is one of the core elements in the development and maintenance of high standards of social work practice.