



**AASW**

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**Australian Association  
of Social Workers**

***Scope of Social Work Practice  
Social Work in Aged Care***

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## Introduction

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The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) **Scope of Social Work Practice: Aged Care** document provides an overview of the role, scope, contribution and evidence base of social work practice in the aged care field.

The social work profession operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, physical and natural environments while recognising the impact of the psychological, social, political and economic determinants on health and wellbeing. With this in mind, the aim of this document is to highlight in a concise, accessible and informative manner the crucial role and services that social workers provide in the aged care sector and that employers and clients can expect.

### The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to **maximising the wellbeing of individuals and society**. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing are underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise principles of **social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights**, including the right to freedom from intimidation and exclusion.

Drawing on theories of social work, social sciences, psychology, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, social workers focus on the interface between the individual and the environment and recognise the impact of social, economic and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing, and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that may impact on wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social work is a **tertiary-qualified profession** recognised nationally and internationally. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the key professional body representing social workers in Australia and is responsible for the accreditation of social work university programs.

The academic qualifications that applicants to the AASW are required to hold are: a **Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Honours** or a **Social Work Qualifying Master's degree**.

The curriculum provides entry-level professional social work education addressing the knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across the diverse range of practice settings, fields of practice and methods of social work practice, and includes an extensive period of field education.

**Graduates of AASW-accredited social work courses are eligible for membership of the AASW.**

Click [here](#) for a full list of AASW accredited courses.



## Role of social work in aged care

Social work in aged care is a vast area of practice. Regardless of context, social workers working with ageing populations (defined as 65 and older) focus on the preservation and improvement of psychological and social functioning. This is paralleled with a holistic and contextual understanding of a client's experience, and a commitment to self-determination, dignity and respect.

A social worker's role is to ensure that in striving towards improved health and wellbeing outcomes of older people, useful and appropriate support systems are in place, engaged and utilised to their full extent. This includes assisting older people, and in some cases their families, to make significant life decisions based on the best aged care related information and resources available.

Social workers collaborate with the older person to ensure person-centred health and wellbeing outcomes are achieved by engaging with appropriate support systems (formal and informal), and evaluating their effectiveness.

Social workers have a unique appreciation of the importance of social support systems, and the isolation experienced by many older persons. In their commitment to human rights and social justice, social workers advocate for the rights of older people against the discrimination, reduced opportunities and elder abuse they can experience. At the broadest level, social workers hold the view, that as a life stage older age should provide people with the opportunities to live healthy, positive and productive lives. Connection to, and participation in, the wider community is a vital part of this process.

Professional social workers work with older people in numerous settings, including government, non-government and private.

These **settings and fields of practice** include:

- Hospitals (inpatient and outpatient)
- Rehabilitation services
- Community health
- Primary health networks
- Indigenous support services
- Aged care assessment teams
- Senior legal services
- Advocacy services
- Aged care facilities
- Mental health services
- Disability services
- Homelessness services
- Palliative care services
- Private practice
- Not-for-profit community services
- Policy and research

With its focus on holistic care, self-determination and the ability to consider the complexity involved from an ethical, legal, psychosocial perspective, social workers have a unique and valuable role in providing appropriate and targeted services to meet the diverse and multidimensional needs of older persons.

Social work with older people occurs in a wide variety of settings and encompasses a large range of methods and approaches. The scope of a social worker's practice is influenced by the agency/organisation and by their own role within it. Despite this great variety, social workers in this field draw upon similar skills sets, regardless of context.

## Scope of social work practice in aged care

When practicing in the aged care field social workers draw on a broad range of biological, psychological, life course and social theories to form their assessments and interventions, and evaluate their practice. Social work assessments range from targeted and brief specific-needs analyses through to comprehensive holistic psychosocial and risk assessments of the full range of social and psychological needs, strengths and stressors; including assessments of family relationships and circumstances. These assessments underpin targeted and needs-based interventions to address the social and emotional issues that are impacting on the individual's health and wellbeing. A social worker's approach to assessment is influenced by their use of specific theories and is based on their own professional training and experience.

While the older person is the primary focus, social workers also work with families, spouses, partners, children, siblings, grandchildren, and carers. Given their training and experience, social workers are well suited to working with an older person within their family and social context; especially in relation to mediating the tensions and conflicts that can arise.

The **scope of practice in aged care** includes:

### Assessments

- Psychosocial assessments
- Risk assessments (such as family violence, and elder abuse)
- Capacity, functioning and needs assessments, including care needs, housing and accommodation
- Conducting specialist comprehensive aged care assessments, as part of Aged Care Assessment Teams to establish eligibility for service options

### Counselling, therapy and mediation

- Individual, family and group work
- Grief and loss
- Adjustment to illness/disability and associated lifestyle changes
- Emotional aspects of the transition to residential care
- Oncology and palliative care
- Interfamily relationships and dynamics

### Mediation and conflict resolution

- Resolving conflict between client and family members regarding decision-making
- Crisis interventions

### Practical assistance

- Assistance with housing (homelessness/unsuitable or unstable accommodation)
- Practical aspects of the transition to residential care

### Case management and service coordination

- Assistance with advanced care planning including obtaining guardianship and/or administration orders for clients who lack capacity to make lifestyle decisions and/or manage their financial and legal affairs
- Coordinating formal and informal support networks
- Referrals

### Education and resources

- Navigating health and welfare systems
- Providing specialist aged care education to the client and their family/friends, service providers and client and community groups

### **Hospital discharge planning**

- Preventing multiple hospital readmissions by rigorous discharge planning and addressing of critical psychosocial determinants

### **Advocacy work**

- Providing information about the older person's rights and entitlements as well as resources available and complaints mechanisms
- Empowering and assisting older people to self-advocate, or advocating on their behalf
- Advocating for change on an organisational and systemic level

### **Policy and research**

- Developing policy, engaging in research and publishing peer reviewed journals.

Social workers also provide **specialist expertise** in addressing the psychosocial aspects of:

- Elder abuse, neglect and family violence
- Mental health, including issues of chronic sorrow and depression associated with grief, loss and adjustment to diagnosis and disability, and psychogeriatric issues
- Psychosocial aspects of aging
- Complex family dynamics and limited social supports
- Homelessness or inappropriate accommodation
- Transition trauma
- Oncology and palliative care
- Socio-legal issues and ethical decision making, for example, advanced health directives, enduring power of attorneys, end-of-life decision making, and withdrawal of life support systems

## **Contribution of social work in aged care**

Social work with older people focuses on the preservation and/or enhancement of functioning and of quality of life. With the focus on holistic care and the ability to consider the complexity involved from various perspectives, social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in this field by providing appropriate and targeted services to meet the multidimensional needs of older people and their families. Social work assessments and interventions are not only of great benefit to the client, but to the decision-making capacities of other professionals. Therefore, social workers are regularly involved in multidisciplinary care teams, especially when interventions are impacted by complex social, psychological, family and institutional dynamics.

Social workers contribute at an organisational level by:

- Identifying and assisting with the removal of barriers that may affect engagement with services and community providers
- Developing culturally appropriate models of service delivery
- Preventing multiple hospital readmissions by rigorous discharge planning and addressing of critical psychosocial determinants
- Reducing inappropriate health service demand through comprehensive psychosocial assessments and intervention, including appropriate referrals to community-based services and engaging with informal support services, for example their family members.
- Advocating for service provision in particular in areas of unmet need
- Providing leadership and management of service delivery, including developing partnership models of service delivery

- Assisting clients with adjustment and transition to life changes and other transitions, for example, a care setting such as day-care, lunch or dinner clubs or long-term residential aged care placements
- Respecting the privacy of the individuals' rights (within medico-legal requirements) and work towards developing skills and confidence to assist the older persons, and their families; assist with maintaining control of their lives and take responsibility for recovery and wellbeing

## Conclusion

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Professional social workers are integral to aged care services in both government and non-government organisations. With their focus on human rights, self-determination and holistic analysis, social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in providing appropriate and targeted services to meet the complex needs of older people, their families and communities within the aged care field. Accordingly, the profession of social work has a clear role in the continuum of aged care services.

## Evidence Informing Practice

### Key Journals:

*Australian Social Work* (Taylor & Francis)  
*British Journal of Social Work* (Oxford)  
*Health & Social Work* (Oxford)  
*Health and Social Care in the Community*  
(Wiley-Blackwell)  
*International Social Work* (Sage)  
*Journal of Gerontological Social Work* (Taylor & Francis)  
*Journal of Social Work* (Sage)  
*Research on Social Work Practice* (Sage)  
*Social Work in Mental Health* (Taylor & Francis)

### Key Articles and Chapters:

Berkman, B., Gardner, D., Zodikoff, B., & Harootyan, L. (2006). Social work and aging in the emerging health care world. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 48(1-2), 203-217

Blackburn, J. A., & Dulmus, C. N. (Eds.) (2007). *Handbook of gerontology: Evidence-based approaches to theory, practice, and policy*. John Wiley & Sons

Gardner, B. (2012). Social work with older people. *Quality in Ageing and Older Adults*, 13(3)

Greene, R. R. (2011). *Social Work with the Aged and their Families* (Vol. 1). Aldine Transaction

Ray, M., Milne, A., Beech, C., Phillips, J. E., Richards, S., Sullivan, M. P., & Lloyd, L. (2014). Gerontological social work: Reflections on its role, purpose and value. *British Journal of Social Work*, bct195

Richardson, V. E., & Barusch, A. S. (2008). *Gerontological practice for the twenty-first century: A social work perspective*. Columbia University Press

Rizzo, V. M., & Rowe, J. M. (2006). Studies of the cost-effectiveness of social work services in aging: A review of the literature. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 16(1), 67-73.

Youdin, R. (2014). *Clinical gerontological social work practice*. Springer Publishing Company.



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