



**AASW**

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**Australian Association  
of Social Workers**

***Scope of Social Work Practice  
Social Work in Mental Health***

**December 2015**

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This document has drawn from content in the  
*AASW's Professional Practice Statement:  
Social Workers Delivering Mental Health  
Services in Public Sector and Non-Government  
Organizations.*

We would like to thank the members of the  
AASW Social Work Mental Health Working  
Group for their contribution to the development  
and writing of this document.

## Introduction

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The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) **Scope of Social Work Practice in Mental Health** provides an overview of the role, scope, contribution and evidence base of social work practice in the mental health 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 economic, psychological, emotional, political, social, legal and environmental determinants of 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 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 is 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, mental health 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 are accredited by the AASW include: 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 education, 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.

The AASW is the assessing authority, on behalf of the Federal Government, for social workers interested in providing mental health interventions through Medicare Australia. Social workers can be accredited as **Mental Health Social Workers** by the AASW.

This accreditation recognises that the social worker has specialist knowledge, skill and experience to provide specific mental health interventions.



## Role of social work in mental health

Social workers are trained to understand and assess that the mental illnesses experienced by individuals, families, groups and communities are not caused or determined by a single factor. There may be intrinsic personal factors, combined with familial, psychological, economic, health, educational, employment, legal or other societal issues that contribute and pose obstacles to people achieving positive mental health and wellbeing. These environmental stressors are the social determinants of physical and mental health and are a central focus for social workers in supporting people with a mental illness.

Social workers focus on analysing whether change needs to occur at the individual level, as well as in other domains. This interactive and systemic analysis distinguishes social work from other health professions in the mental health sector. In their commitment to human rights and social justice, professional social workers advocate for the rights of clients against the discrimination, reduced opportunities and abuse they can experience. Through therapeutic interventions and the mobilisation of services and supports, mental health social workers enhance the person's social functioning, promote recovery and resilience and aim to reduce stigma.

Social workers also initiate and lead the introduction and delivery of new programs and services.

Social workers practice in specialist mental health and generalist settings across the age and illness spectrum in numerous roles including: clinical mental health social worker, caseworker, case manager, family support worker, drug and alcohol counsellor, child and family counsellor, rehabilitation worker, crisis counsellor and therapist.

The **settings and fields of social work mental health practice** include, but are not limited to:

- **Public mental Health:** clinical, community, residential, inpatient and emergency department settings. Psychosocial outreach, recovery and rehabilitation.
- **Adult mental health:** Working as part of multidisciplinary teams, social workers provide Individual/family/carer assessment, intervention, treatment and support, including coordination of discharge planning.
- **Private practice:** Self-employed mental health social workers providing counselling and therapeutic interventions. These can be direct fee for service or through government-funded initiatives.
- **Community teams:** Working as case managers or lead clinicians in combination with multidisciplinary teams including psychiatrists, particularly with disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and eating disorders.
- **Child and adolescent mental health teams:** As part of multi-disciplinary teams, in lead or clinician roles, supporting the mental health needs for children of ages 0 to 18 years and their families. This can include inpatient and/or community setting
- **Primary mental health care:** Longer term therapy for more high prevalence disorders such as anxiety and depression where the psychiatric risks are not of a severe and enduring nature.
- **Tertiary mental health services:** Assessment, case management, crisis intervention, rehabilitation and inpatient treatment. This can also include involvement in the implementation of community treatment orders as psychiatric case managers.

- **Non-government organisations (NGO):** Government funded organisations to provide outreach mental health services and work closely with the government psychiatric services.
- **Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI/FAPMI):** Service development and specific programs aimed to support families where a parent has a diagnosed mental illness.
- **Prevention programs:** Working in an educational context, social workers are based at or attached to schools, educational settings and in the early childhood sector.
- **Perinatal services:** Community-based multidisciplinary teams supporting expectant or new mothers and partners, focusing on those at risk of a mental illness or disorder.
- **Maternity support services:** As an inpatient service, supporting new mothers and parents generally, and when risks of post-natal depression or other emerging needs are identified.
- **Aged mental health:** Liaising closely with family members, community teams, GPs, aged care facilities in the coordination of discharge planning and transition to community or to an aged facility.
- **Veterans and current serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel:** Working with veterans and serving ADF personnel, and their families, and providing psychosocial interventions.
- **Indigenous communities:** Mental health and wellbeing services to Indigenous communities.
- **Specialist services:** Including forensic services, transcultural mental health Services, prison mental health services

## Scope of social work of practice in mental health

Depending on the employment setting, social workers in the mental health field deliver the following professional services:

### Direct services

- Assessment, intervention, treatment and support, including therapy to individuals, their families/carers and groups with mental health disorders, or to prevent the emergence of mental health concerns in vulnerable people
- Mental State Examination and other relevant assessments across the range of presentations and the lifespan
- Evidence-based therapeutic treatments for DSM 5/ICD 10 illness categories
- Bereavement, grief and loss counselling
- Family/parent–child interventions, including evidence-based family interventions
- Couple therapy and relationship counselling
- Therapeutic and psycho-educational group programs
- Assessment and treatments for alcohol and other drug misuse and dual diagnosis/comorbid presentations
- Culturally competent interventions and/or referrals for specific groups

### Case management/case coordination

- Coordinating intra and inter agency services for individuals and families with complex presentations requiring multiple levels and types of services/resources
- Advocacy with services for clients in order to provide continuity of care and safety around admission and discharge to services
- Contributing to the resolution of socio-legal issues and guardianship issues

- Crisis intervention (according to relevant state Mental Health Acts), safety planning, risk assessment and risk management, referral to required services
- Responding to the wellbeing and needs of children, including those who are vulnerable and at risk
- Facilitating access to information, services and resources
- Coordination of care in relation to mental health and physical health disorders

### **Program development, management and leadership**

- The development, introduction and delivery of new programs and services
- Overseeing and supporting the development and quality of the mental health social work workforce
- Overseeing a mental health program and/or service system, organisational development
- Developing and monitoring organisational policy and procedures
- Promoting collaboration between all disciplines working with the service
- Managing staff to provide quality services
- Managing quality assurance programs
- The provision of clinical supervision to social workers and other mental health team members

### **Community development and mental health promotion**

- Working with a community to conduct needs analysis, identify mental health issues and find solutions from a community perspective
- Preventing unplanned or multiple admissions, reducing situational crises through establishing strong, supportive networks, as well as access to appropriate resources

- Advocacy in relation to inequalities in access to or delivery of mental health services, especially for vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals

### **Program and policy practice development**

- Leading and developing practice development and change, both for social work and other disciplines
- Reducing mental health service blockage by identifying and acting upon factors and issues that may compromise an individual's recovery, thereby facilitating their safe, timely and seamless transition through the mental health sector
- Consulting with key stakeholders about policy and program development

### **Research and evaluation:**

- Contributing to investment and future planning in mental health service delivery by innovative social work practices, programs and research activities, particularly with vulnerable populations
- Consulting with professionals who have specialist knowledge as well as with individuals with mental health disorders about research and evaluation projects
- Professional writing and publication in peer reviewed journals aiming to disseminate practice accountability and effectiveness

**“Through therapeutic interventions and the mobilisation of services and supports, mental health social workers enhance the person’s social functioning, promote recovery and resilience and aim to reduce stigma.”**

## Contribution of social work in mental health

Social workers provide a significant contribution to the field by maintaining a dual focus on both the individual and family/contextual domains, and it is this understanding that distinguishes social work from other health professions in the sector. Social workers are regularly involved with individuals and families experiencing complex social, psychological, family and institutional dynamics. Social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in providing appropriate and targeted services and therefore have a clear role in the provision of effective mental health services.

Individuals and families have different reactions to mental health disorders, both in terms of conditions that are emerging and those resulting from a situational crisis. Social workers contribute greatly to their clients and organisations by undertaking evidence-informed assessments and interventions. The social work assessment process takes into account the impact of biomedical factors and the range of psychological, social and other needs of the individual experiencing mental health disorder. Within this framework social workers respect the primacy of the individual's rights (within medico-legal requirements) and work towards developing skills and confidence to assist individuals and their families maintain control of their lives and take responsibility for recovery and wellbeing.

Social workers recognise the individual's role in treatment planning and the individual's right to have a knowledgeable, skilled practitioner who is guided by ethical practice.

## Conclusion

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Social workers work in multi-disciplinary mental health teams and within these teams, social workers recognise and address the multiple factors contributing to the specific context of an individual, family or group within the community. In assessing and intervening in the psychosocial factors affecting the relationship between the people with a mental illness/disorder, their significant others and the wider community, they make a significant contribution to the field. Accordingly, the profession of social work has a clear role in the continuum of mental health 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 Social Work* (Sage)  
*Research on Social Work Practice* (Sage)  
*Social Work in Mental Health* (Taylor & Francis)

### Key Articles/Chapters:

Bland, R. & Renouf, N. (2001). Social work and the mental health team. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 9(3), 238-241

Cuijpers, P. (1999). The effects of family interventions on relatives' burden: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Mental Health*, 8(3), 275-85

Lucksted, A., McFarlane, W. R., Downing, D., Dixon, L. B. (2012). Recent developments in family psychoeducation as an evidence-based practice. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 38(1), 101-121

Martin, J. (2012). *Mental health social work*, Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide

Pritchard, C. (2006). *Mental health social work: Evidence-based practice*. Routledge, USA

Shankar, J., Martin, J., & McDonald, C. (2009). Emerging areas for practice for mental health social workers: Education and employment. *Australian Social Work*, 62(1), 28-45

Thyer, B. A., & Wodarski, J. S. (Eds.) (2007). *Social work in mental health: An evidence-based approach*. John Wiley & Sons, USA

Webber, M. (2011). *Evidence-based policy and practice in mental health social work* (2nd ed.). Learning Matters, Exeter

Wodarski, J. S., & Feit, M. D. (2012). Social group work practice: An evidence-based approach. *Journal of Evidence-based Social Work*, 9(4), 414-420





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