Social Work Profession

- Professional social workers assist individuals, groups, or communities to restore or enhance their capacity for social functioning, while creating societal conditions favorable to their goals. The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behavior, of social, economic and cultural institutions, and of the interaction of all these factors.
- According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), social work is one of the fastest growing careers in the United States. The profession is expected to grow by 30% by 2010; currently, nearly 600,000 people hold social work degrees.
- Social workers are highly trained and experienced professionals. Only those who have earned social work degrees at the bachelor’s, master’s or doctoral levels, and completed a minimum number of hours in supervised fieldwork, are “professional social workers.”
- According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), 22,163 junior and senior students were enrolled in baccalaureate social work programs in 2000; there were also 20,369 full-time and 13,446 part-time students enrolled in master’s degree programs. In the same year, 15,007 individuals graduated with MSW degrees and 11,773 graduated with BSW degrees. In addition, 229 doctoral degrees in social work were awarded in 2000. Currently there are over 8,000 social work professors teaching in the United States.
- Social workers help people overcome some of life’s most difficult challenges: poverty, discrimination, abuse, addiction, physical illness, divorce, loss, unemployment, educational problems, disability, and mental illness. They help prevent crises and counsel individuals, families, and communities to cope more effectively with the stresses of everyday life.
- Professional social workers are found in every facet of community life—in schools, hospitals, mental health clinics, senior centers, elected office, private practices, prisons, military, corporations, and in numerous public and private agencies that serve individuals and families in need. They often specialize in one or more of the following practice areas:
  - According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), professional social workers are the nation’s largest group of mental health services providers. There are more clinically trained social workers—over 190,000 in 1998—than psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric nurses combined. Federal law and the National Institutes of Health recognize social work as one of five core mental health professions.
  - Over 40% of all disaster mental health volunteers trained by the American Red Cross are professional social workers.
  - There are over 170 social workers in national, state and local elected office, including two U.S. Senators and four U.S. Representatives. These include: Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Rep. Ciro D. Rodriguez (D-TX), Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA), Rep. Ed Towns (D-NY), and Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA).
- Today, 48 special interest social work organizations contribute to the vitality and credibility of the social work profession.

Social Work History

Since the first social work class was offered in the summer of 1898 at Columbia University, social workers have led the way developing private and charitable
organizations to serve people in need. Social workers continue to address the needs of society and bring our nation’s social problems to the public’s attention.

Today, Americans enjoy many privileges because early social workers saw miseries and injustices and took action, inspiring others along the way. Many of the benefits we take for granted came about because social workers—working with families and institutions—spoke out against abuse and neglect.

- The civil rights of all people regardless of gender, race, faith, or sexual orientation are protected.
- Workers enjoy unemployment insurance, disability pay, worker’s compensation and Social Security.
- People with mental illness and developmental disabilities are now afforded humane treatment.
- Medicaid and Medicare give poor, disabled and elderly people access to health care.
- Society seeks to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Treatment for mental illness and substance abuse is gradually losing its stigma.
- The social work profession celebrated its Centennial in 1998. That year, several important artifacts from across the country were donated to the Smithsonian Institution to commemorate 100 years of professional social work in the United States.
- Social work pioneer Jane Addams was one of the first women to receive a Nobel Peace Prize, which was awarded in 1931. Known best for establishing settlement houses in Chicago for immigrants in the early 1900s, Addams was a dedicated community organizer and peace activist.
- Frances Perkins, a social worker, was the first woman to be appointed to the cabinet of a U.S. President. As President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor, Perkins drafted much of the New Deal legislation in the 1940s.
- Social worker and civil rights trailblazer Whitney M. Young, Jr. became the executive director of the National Urban League while serving as dean for the Atlanta School of Social Work. He also served as president of NASW in the late 1960s. A noted expert in American race relations, Time Magazine acknowledged Young as a key inspiration for President Johnson’s War on Poverty.
- Other famous social workers include Harry Hopkins (Works Progress Administration), Dorothy Height (National Council of Negro Women), and Jeanette Rankin (the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress).