

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Indicators for  
the Achievement of the  
NASW Standards for  
Cultural  
Competence  
in Social Work Practice



National Association of Social Workers

2007



Indicators for  
the Achievement of the  
NASW Standards for  
**Cultural**  

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**Competence**  
in Social Work Practice

## **National Association of Social Workers**

Elvira Craig de Silva, DSW, ACSW  
NASW President

Elizabeth J. Clark, PhD, ACSW, MPH,  
NASW Executive Director

## **National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity 1999-2001 (Standards)**

Nelrene Yellow Bird, MSW  
Ada E. Deer, ACSW  
Lina Fong, PhD, ACSW, LCSW  
Carmen Ortiz Hendricks, DSW, ACSW  
Inderjit K. Jaipaul, DSW, ACSW  
Emma Montero, MSW  
Irene Moreda, DSW  
Robert D. Showers, BSW  
Clara Simmons, ACSW, DCSW  
Saundra H. Starks, EdD, ACSW, LCSW  
Halaevalu F. Vakalahi, DSW

## **National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity 2002-2006 (Indicators)**

Sally Alonzo Bell, PhD, LCSW  
Barbara A. Candaes, PhD, LCSW, MPH  
Iraida V. Carrion, MSW  
Betty Garcia, PhD, MSW, LCSW  
Mary Hall, PhD, ACSW, LICSW  
Vivian H. Jackson, ACSW, LICSW  
Claudia Long, PhD, MSW  
Adelaida Montemayor, LMSW-ACP  
Irene Moreda, DSW  
Clara Simmons, ACSW, DCSW  
Saundra H. Starks, EdD, ACSW, LCSW  
Rita Takahashi, PhD, MSW  
Lann Thompson, MA, MSSW, EdD  
Halaevalu F. Vakalahi, PhD  
Susan Yi-Millette, ABD, MSW, EdD, ACSW, LCSW

## **NASW Staff**

Luisa López, MSW  
Leticia Díaz, MS

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# Standards

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## for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice

### **Standard 1. Ethics and Values**

Social workers shall function in accordance with the values, ethics, and standards of the profession, recognizing how personal and professional values may conflict with or accommodate the needs of diverse clients.

### **Standard 2. Self-Awareness**

Social workers shall seek to develop an understanding of their own personal, cultural values and beliefs as one way of appreciating the importance of multicultural identities in the lives of people.

### **Standard 3. Cross-Cultural Knowledge**

Social workers shall have and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions of major client groups that they serve.

### **Standard 4. Cross-Cultural Skills**

Social workers shall use appropriate methodological approaches, skills, and techniques that reflect the workers' understanding of the role of culture in the helping process.

### **Standard 5. Service Delivery**

Social workers shall be knowledgeable about and skillful in the use of services available in the community and broader society and be able to make appropriate referrals for their diverse clients.

### **Standard 6. Empowerment and Advocacy**

Social workers shall be aware of the effect of social policies and programs on diverse client populations, advocating for and with clients whenever appropriate.

### **Standard 7. Diverse Workforce**

Social workers shall support and advocate for recruitment, admissions and hiring, and retention efforts in social work programs and agencies that ensure diversity within the profession.

### **Standard 8. Professional Education**

Social workers shall advocate for and participate in educational and training programs that help advance cultural competence within the profession.

### **Standard 9. Language Diversity**

Social workers shall seek to provide or advocate for the provision of information, referrals, and services in the language appropriate to the client, which may include use of interpreters.

### **Standard 10. Cross-Cultural Leadership**

Social workers shall be able to communicate information about diverse client groups to other professionals.

Prepared by the  
NASW National Committee  
on Racial and Ethnic Diversity

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## Introduction

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The *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* are based on the policy statement “Cultural Competence in the Social Work Profession” published in *Social Work Speaks: NASW Policy Statements* (2000b) and the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2000a), which charges social workers with the ethical responsibility to be culturally competent. Both were originally adopted by the 1996 NASW Delegate Assembly. The Indicators for the Achievement of the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in the Social Work Profession are designed as an extension of the Standards to provide additional guidance on the implementation and realization of culturally competent practice.

NASW “supports and encourages the development of standards for culturally competent social work practice, a definition of expertise, and the advancement of practice models that have relevance for the range of needs and services represented by diverse client populations” (NASW, 2000b, p. 61). The material that follows is the first attempt by the profession to delineate standards for culturally competent social work practice.

The United States is constantly undergoing major demographic changes. The 1990 to 2000 population growth was the largest in American history with a dramatic increase in people of color from 20 percent to 25 percent (Perry & Mackum, 2001). Those changes alter and increase the diversity confronting social workers daily in their agencies. The complexities associated with cultural diversity in the United States affect all aspects of professional social work practice, requiring social workers to strive to deliver culturally competent services to an ever-increasing

broad range of clients. The social work profession traditionally has emphasized the importance of the person-in-environment and the dual perspective, the concept that all people are part of two systems: the larger societal system and their immediate environments (Norton, 1978). Social workers using a person-in-environment framework for assessment need to include to varying degrees important cultural factors that have meaning for clients and reflect the culture of the world around them.

In the United States, cultural diversity in social work has primarily been associated with race and ethnicity, but diversity is taking on a broader meaning to include the sociocultural experiences of people of different genders, social classes, religious and spiritual beliefs, sexual orientations, ages, and physical and mental abilities. A brief review of the social work literature in the past few years points to the range of potential content areas that require culturally sensitive and culturally competent interventions. These include addressing racial identity formation for people of color as well as for white people; the interrelationship among class, race, ethnicity, and gender; working with low-income families; working with older adults; the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of clients; the development of gender identity and sexual orientation; immigration, acculturation, and assimilation stresses; biculturalism; working with people with disabilities; empowerment skills; community building; reaching out to new populations of color; and how to train for culturally competent models of practice.

Therefore, cultural competence in social work practice implies a heightened consciousness of how clients experience their uniqueness and deal with their differences and similarities within a larger social context. The achievement of cultural competence is an ongoing process. Although these indicators describe an ideal state, the National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity (NCORED) encourages social work practitioners and agency leaders to put forth good faith efforts to use them.

## Definitions

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The NASW Board of Directors, at its June 2001 meeting, accepted the following definitions of *culture, competence, and cultural competence* in the practice of social work. These definitions are drawn from the NASW *Code of Ethics* and *Social Work Speaks*.

### Areas of Practice

“These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation” (NASW, 1999, p. 1).

### Clients

“Clients’ is used inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities” (NASW, 1999, p. 1).

### Culture

“The word ‘culture’ is used because it implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group” (NASW, 2000b, p. 61). Culture often is referred to as the totality of ways being passed on from generation to generation. The term culture includes ways in which people with disabilities or people from various religious backgrounds or people who are gay, lesbian, or transgender experience the world around them.

The Preamble to the NASW *Code of Ethics* begins by stating:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the

basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. And goes on to say, “Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice” (NASW, 2000a, p. 1). Second, culture is mentioned in two ethical standards:

Value: *Social Justice* and the Ethical Principle: *Social workers challenge social injustice*.

This means that social workers’ social change efforts seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity.

Value: *Dignity and Worth of the Person* and the Ethical Principle: *Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person*.

This value states that social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.

### Competence

The word competence is used because it implies having the capacity to function effectively within the context of culturally integrated patterns of human behavior defined by the group.

In the *Code of Ethics* competence is discussed in several ways. First as a value of the profession:

Value: *Competence* and the Ethical Principle: *Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise*.

This value encourages social workers to continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Second, competence is discussed as an ethical standard:

#### 1.04 Competence

- Social workers should provide services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their education, training, license, certification, consultation received, supervised experience, or other relevant professional experience.
- Social workers should provide services in substantive areas or use intervention techniques or approaches that are new to them only after engaging in appropriate study, training, consultation, and supervision from people who are competent in those interventions or techniques.
- When generally recognized standards do not exist with respect to an emerging area of practice, social workers should exercise careful judgment and take responsible steps (including appropriate education, research, training, consultation, and supervision) to ensure the competence of their work and to protect clients from harm.

Cultural competence is never fully realized, achieved, or completed, but rather cultural competence is a lifelong process for social workers who will always encounter diverse clients and new situations in their practice.

Supervisors and workers should have the expectation that cultural competence is an ongoing learning process integral and central to daily supervision.

#### Cultural Competence

*Cultural competence* refers to the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and

other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.

“Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or among professionals and enable the system, agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (NASW, 2000b, p. 61).

Operationally defined, *cultural competence* is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes (Davis & Donald, 1997). Competence in cross-cultural functioning means learning new patterns of behavior and effectively applying them in appropriate settings.

Gallegos (1982) provided one of the first conceptualizations of ethnic competence as “a set of procedures and activities to be used in acquiring culturally relevant insights into the problems of minority clients and the means of applying such insights to the development of intervention strategies that are culturally appropriate for these clients.” (p. 4). This kind of sophisticated cultural competence does not come naturally to any social worker and requires a high level of professionalism and knowledge.

There are five essential elements that contribute to a system’s ability to become more culturally competent. The system should (1) value diversity, (2) have the capacity for cultural self-assessment, (3) be conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, (4) institutionalize cultural knowledge, and (5) develop programs and services that reflect an understanding of diversity between



and within cultures. These five elements must be manifested in every level of the service delivery system. They should be reflected in attitudes, structures, policies, and services.

The specific Ethical Standard for culturally competent social work practice is contained under *Section 1. Social workers' ethical responsibilities to clients*.

#### **1.05 Cultural Competence and Social Diversity**

- Social workers should understand culture and its functions in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures.
- Social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients' cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients' cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups.
- Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability.

Finally, the Code reemphasizes the importance of cultural competence in the last section of the Code, *Section 6. Social Workers Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society*.

#### **6.04 Social and Political Action**

Social workers should act to expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups.

Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people.

Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability.

## Goals and Objectives of the Standards

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These standards address the need for definition, support, and encouragement for the development of a high level of social work practice that encourages cultural competence among all social workers so that they can respond effectively, knowledgeably, sensitively, and skillfully to the diversity inherent in the agencies in which they work and with the clients and communities they serve.

These standards intend to move the discussion of cultural competence within social work practice toward the development of clearer guidelines, goals, and objectives for the future of social work practice.

The specific goals of the standards are

- to maintain and improve the quality of culturally competent services provided by social workers and programs delivered by social service agencies
- to establish professional expectations so that social workers can monitor and evaluate their culturally competent practice
- to provide a framework for social workers to assess culturally competent practice
- to inform consumers, governmental regulatory bodies, and others, such as insurance carriers, about the profession's standards for culturally competent practice
- to establish specific ethical guidelines for culturally competent social work practice in agency or private practice settings
- to provide documentation of professional expectations for agencies, peer review committees, state regulatory bodies, insurance carriers, and others.

## Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice

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### Standard 1. Ethics and Values

Social workers shall function in accordance with the values, ethics, and standards of the profession, recognizing how personal and professional values may conflict with or accommodate the needs of diverse clients.

### Interpretation

A major characteristic of a profession is its ability to establish ethical standards to help professionals identify ethical issues in practice and to guide them in determining what is ethically acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Reamer, 1998).

Social work has developed a comprehensive set of ethical standards embodied in the NASW *Code of Ethics* that “address a wide range of issues, including, for example, social workers’ handling of confidential information, sexual contact between social workers and their clients, conflicts of interest, supervision, education and training, and social and political action” (Reamer, 1998, p. 2). The Code includes a mission statement, which sets forth several key elements in social work practice, mainly the social workers’ commitment to enhancing human well-being and helping meet basic human needs of all people; client empowerment; service to people who are vulnerable and oppressed; focus on individual well-being in a social context; promotion of social justice and social change; and *sensitivity to cultural and ethnic diversity*. Social workers clearly have an ethical responsibility to be culturally competent practitioners.

The Code recognizes that culture and ethnicity may influence how individuals cope with problems

and interact with each other. What is behaviorally appropriate in one culture may seem abnormal in another. Accepted practice in one culture may be prohibited in another. To fully understand and appreciate these differences, social workers must be familiar with varying cultural traditions and norms. Clients' cultural backgrounds may affect their help-seeking behaviors as well. The ways in which social services are planned and implemented need to be culturally sensitive to be culturally effective. Cultural competence builds on the profession's valued stance on self-determination and individual dignity and worth, adding inclusion, tolerance, and respect for diversity in all its forms. It requires social workers to struggle with ethical dilemmas arising from value conflicts or special needs of diverse clients such as helping clients enroll in mandated training or mental health services that are culturally insensitive. Cultural competence requires social workers to recognize the strengths that exist in all cultures. This does not imply a universal nor automatic acceptance of all practices of all cultures. For example, some cultures subjugate women, oppress persons based on sexual orientation, and value the use of corporal punishment and the death penalty. Cultural competence in social work practice must be informed by and applied within the context of NASW's *Code of Ethics* and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

### Indicators

#### Culturally competent social workers will demonstrate

1. knowledge of the NASW *Code of Ethics*
2. knowledge of social justice and human rights principles
3. ability to describe areas of conflict and

- accommodation between personal values, professional values, and those of other cultures.
4. ability to recognize the convergence and disparity between the values of the dominant society and the values of the historically oppressed, underrepresented, and underserved populations
5. appreciation and respect of cultural differences and strengths
6. awareness of the ethical dilemmas they may encounter when they work with diverse clients in relationship to:
  - boundaries
  - norms of behavior
  - styles of advocacy
  - diverse values and beliefs
  - dual relationships
  - styles of conflict management.

### Standard 2. Self-Awareness

Social workers shall develop an understanding of their own personal and cultural values and beliefs as a first step in appreciating the importance of multicultural identities in the lives of people.

### Interpretation

Cultural competence requires social workers to examine their own cultural backgrounds and identities to increase awareness of personal assumptions, values, and biases. The workers' self-awareness of their own cultural identities is as fundamental to practice as the informed assumptions about clients' cultural backgrounds and experiences in the United States. This awareness of personal values, beliefs, and biases inform their practice and influence relationships with clients. Cultural competence includes knowing and acknowledging how fears, ignorance, and the "isms" (racism, sexism, ethnocentrism,

heterosexism, ageism, classism) have influenced their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings.

Social workers need to be able to move from being culturally aware of their own heritage to becoming culturally aware of the heritage of others. They can value and celebrate differences in others rather than maintain an ethnocentric stance and can demonstrate comfort with differences between themselves and others. They have an awareness of personal and professional limitations that may warrant the referral of a client to another social worker or agency that can best meet the clients' needs. Self-awareness also helps in understanding the process of cultural identity formation and helps guard against stereotyping. As one develops the diversity within one's own group, one can be more open to the diversity within other groups.

Cultural competence also requires social workers to appreciate how workers need to move from cultural awareness to cultural sensitivity before achieving cultural competence and to evaluate growth and development throughout these different levels of cultural competence in practice.

Self-awareness becomes the basis for professional development and should be supported by supervision and agency administration. Agency administrators and public policy advocates also need to develop strategies to reduce their own biases and expand their self-awareness.

### Indicators

#### Culturally competent social workers will

1. examine and describe their cultural background, social identities, and cultural heritage to increase awareness of assumptions,

- values, beliefs, and biases and recognize how these affect services and influence relationships and interactions with clients.
2. identify how absence of knowledge, fears, and "isms" (racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, ageism, classism) have influenced their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings.
3. develop and apply strategies to inform and change their detrimental attitudes, beliefs, and feelings.
4. demonstrate an awareness of personal or professional limitations that may warrant the referral of a client or organization to another resource that can better meet their needs and the skills to do this effectively.
5. demonstrate increased comfort with self- and other-awareness about different cultural customs and views of the world.
6. use relationships with supervisors, mentors, and colleagues to enrich self-awareness.

### Standard 3. Cross-Cultural Knowledge

Social workers shall have and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions of major client groups served.

### Interpretation

Cultural competence is not static and requires frequent relearning and unlearning about diversity. Social workers need to take every opportunity to expand their cultural knowledge and expertise by expanding their understanding of the following areas: "the impact of culture on behavior, attitudes, and values; the help-seeking behaviors of diverse client groups; the role of language, speech patterns, and communication styles of various client groups in the communities served; the

impact of social service policies on various client groups; the resources (agencies, people, informal helping networks, and research) that can be used on behalf of diverse client groups; the ways that professional values may conflict with or accommodate the needs of diverse client groups; and the power relationships in the community, agencies, or institutions and their impact on diverse client groups” (Gallegos, pp. 7–8).

Social workers need to possess specific knowledge about the particular providers and client groups they work with, including the range of historical experiences, resettlement patterns, individual and group oppression, adjustment styles, socioeconomic backgrounds, life processes, learning styles, cognitive skills, worldviews and specific cultural customs and practices, their definition of and beliefs about the causation of wellness and illness or normality and abnormality, and how care and services should be delivered. They also must seek specialized knowledge about U.S. social, cultural, and political systems, how they operate, and how they serve or fail to serve specific client groups. This includes knowledge of institutional, class, culture, and language barriers that prevent diverse client group members from using services.

Cultural competence requires explicit knowledge of traditional theories and principles concerning such areas as human behavior, life cycle development, problem-solving skills, prevention, and rehabilitation. Social workers need the critical skill of asking the right questions, being comfortable with discussing cultural differences, and asking clients about what works for them and what is comfortable for them in these discussions. Furthermore, culturally competent social workers need to know the limitations and strengths of current theories, processes and practice models, and which have

specific applicability and relevance to the service needs of culturally diverse client groups.

### Indicators

#### Culturally competent social workers will

1. expand their cultural knowledge and expertise by studying:
  - the help-seeking behaviors and pathways of diverse client groups
  - the historical context of diverse communities
  - the role of language, speech patterns, and communication styles of diverse client groups
  - the impact of social service policies on diverse groups served
  - the resources such as agencies, people, informal helping networks, and research that can be mobilized on behalf of diverse clients
2. possess specific knowledge about traditional and nontraditional providers and client groups that they serve, including:
  - historical experiences, immigration, resettlement patterns, individual and group oppression, adjustment styles, socioeconomic backgrounds, and life processes
  - learning styles, cognitive skills, worldviews, and specific cultural concerns and practices
  - definitions of and beliefs about service-related concepts such as the causation of wellness and illness, physical and psychological disorders, normality and abnormality, family roles and responsibilities, child rearing practices, birth, marriage, death and dying, and so forth
  - beliefs and practices related to how care and services should be delivered, including diverse approaches to service delivery and alternative healing options
  - factors associated with acculturation and assimilation.
3. demonstrate knowledge of the power

- relationships in the community and in institutions, and how these affect diverse groups.
4. possess specific knowledge about U.S., global, social, cultural, and political systems—how they operate and how they serve or fail to serve client groups; include knowledge about institutional, class, cultural, and language barriers to service.
  5. identify the limitations and strengths of contemporary theories and practice models and identify those that have applicability and relevance to their specific client population.
  6. recognize the heterogeneity within cultural groups and similarity across cultural groups.
  7. describe how privilege is manifested by people within different groups.
  8. describe the effects that dominant and non-dominant status has on interpersonal relations and group dynamics in the workplace.
  9. distinguish between intentional and unintentional assertion of race and class privilege.
  10. recognize the intersection of “isms” (for example, racism with classism) and the institutionalization of “isms”.
  11. acknowledge the ways in which their membership in various social groups influences their worldview and contributes to their own patterns of privileged behavior or internalized oppression.
  12. understand the interaction of the cultural systems of the social worker, client, the particular service setting, and the broader immediate community.

#### **Standard 4. Cross-Cultural Skills**

Social workers shall use appropriate methodological approaches, skills, and techniques that reflect the workers’ understanding of the role of culture in the helping process.

#### **Interpretation**

The personal attributes of a culturally competent social worker include qualities that reflect genuineness, empathy, and warmth; the capacity to respond flexibly to a range of possible solutions; an acceptance of and openness to differences among people; a willingness to learn to work with clients of different backgrounds; an articulation and clarification of stereotypes and biases and how these may accommodate or conflict with the needs of diverse client groups; and personal commitment to alleviate racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and poverty. These attributes are important to the direct practitioner and to the agency administrator.

More specifically, social workers should have the skills to

- work with a wide range of people who are culturally different or similar to themselves, and establish avenues for learning about the cultures of these clients
- assess the meaning of culture for individual clients and client groups, encourage open discussion of differences, and respond to culturally biased cues
- master interviewing techniques that reflect an understanding of the role of language in the client’s culture
- conduct a comprehensive assessment of client systems in which cultural norms and behaviors are evaluated as strengths and differentiated from problematic or symptomatic behaviors
- integrate the information gained from a culturally competent assessment into culturally appropriate intervention plans and involve clients and respect their choices in developing goals for service
- select and develop appropriate methods,

skills, and techniques that are attuned to their clients' cultural, bicultural, or marginal experiences in their environments

- generate a wide variety of verbal and nonverbal communication skills in response to direct and indirect communication styles of diverse clients
- understand the interaction of the cultural systems of the social worker, the client, the particular agency setting, and the broader immediate community
- effectively use the clients' natural support system in resolving problems—for example, folk healers, storefronts, religious and spiritual leaders, families of creation, and other community resources
- demonstrate advocacy and empowerment skills in work with clients, recognizing and combating the “isms”, stereotypes, and myths held by individuals and institutions
- identify service delivery systems or models that are appropriate to the targeted client population and make appropriate referrals when indicated
- consult with supervisors and colleagues for feedback and monitoring of performance and identify features of their own professional style that impede or enhance their culturally competent practice
- evaluate the validity and applicability of new techniques, research, and knowledge for work with diverse client groups.

### Indicators

#### Culturally competent social workers will

1. interact with persons from a wide range of cultures
2. display proficiency in discussing cultural difference with colleagues and clients.
3. develop and implement a comprehensive

assessment of clients in which culturally normative behavior is differentiated from problem or symptomatic behavior.

4. assess cultural strengths and limitations/ challenges and their impact on individual and group functioning, and integrate this understanding into intervention plans.
5. select and develop appropriate methods, skills, and techniques that are attuned to their clients' cultural, multicultural, or marginal experiences in their environments.
6. adapt and use a variety of culturally proficient models.
7. communicate effectively with culturally and linguistically different clients through language acquisition, proper use of interpreters, verbal and nonverbal skills, and culturally appropriate protocols.
8. advocate for the use of interpreters who are both linguistically and culturally competent and prepared to work in the social services environment.
9. effectively employ the clients' natural support system in resolving problems, for example, folk healers, indigenous remedies, religious leaders, friends, family, and other community residents and organizations.
10. advocate, negotiate, and employ empowerment skills in their work with clients.
11. consult with supervisors and colleagues for feedback and monitoring of performance and identify features of their own professional style that impede or enhance their culturally competent practice.

#### Standard 5. Service Delivery

Social workers shall be knowledgeable about and skillful in the use of services available in the community and broader society and be able to make appropriate referrals for their diverse clients.

## Interpretation

Agencies and professional social work organizations need to promote cultural competence by supporting the evaluation of culturally competent service delivery models and setting standards for cultural competence within these settings. Culturally competent social workers need to be aware of and vigilant about the dynamics that result from cultural differences and similarities between workers and clients. This includes monitoring cultural competence among social workers (agency evaluations, supervision, in-service training, and feedback from clients).

Social workers need to detect and prevent exclusion of diverse clients from service opportunities and seek to create opportunities for clients, matching their needs with culturally competent service delivery systems or adapting services to better meet the culturally unique needs of clients. Furthermore, they need to foster policies and procedures that help ensure access to care that accommodates varying cultural beliefs.

For direct practitioners, policymakers, or administrators, this specifically involves

- actively recruiting multiethnic staff and including cultural competence requirements in job descriptions and performance and promotion measures
- reviewing the current and emergent demographic trends for the geographic area served by the agency to determine service needs for the provision of interpretation and translation services
- creating service delivery systems or models that are more appropriate to the targeted client populations or advocating for the creation of such services

- including participation by clients as major stakeholders in the development of service delivery systems
- ensuring that program decor and design is reflective of the cultural heritage of clients and families using the service
- attending to social issues (for example, housing, education, police, and social justice) that concern clients of diverse backgrounds
- not accepting staff remarks that insult or demean clients and their culture
- supporting the inclusion of cultural competence standards in accreditation bodies and organizational policies as well as in licensing and certification examinations
- developing staffing plans that reflect the organization and the targeted client population (for example, hiring, position descriptions, performance evaluations, training)
- developing performance measures to assess culturally competent practice
- including participation of client groups in the development of research and treatment protocols.

## Indicators

### Culturally competent social workers will

1. identify the formal and informal resources in the community, describe their strengths and weaknesses, and facilitate referrals as indicated, tailored to the culturally relevant needs of the client.
2. actively advocate for and cooperate with efforts to create culturally competent services and programs by:
  - recruiting multiethnic/multicultural staff and including cultural competence requirements in job descriptions and performance and promotion measures



- reviewing the current and emergent demographic trends for the geographic area served by the agency to determine needs for the provision of interpretation and translation services
  - creating service delivery systems or models that are more appropriate to the targeted client populations or advocating for the development and implementation of such services
  - including clients as major stakeholders in the participation, decision making, and evaluation of service delivery systems
  - ensuring that program decor and design is reflective of the cultural heritage of clients and families using the service
  - attending to social issues (for example, housing, education, police, and social justice) that concern clients of diverse backgrounds
  - finding effective strategies for confronting staff remarks that insult or demean clients and their culture
  - supporting the inclusion of cultural competence standards in accreditation bodies and organizational policies as well as in licensing and certification examinations
  - developing staffing plans that reflect the targeted client population (for example, hiring, position descriptions, performance evaluations, training)
  - developing performance measures to assess culturally competent practice
  - supporting participation of client groups in the development of research, treatment, and intervention protocols
3. build culturally competent organizations through the following policies and practices:
- an administrative mission and purpose that embodies cultural competency/proficiency in the values, goals, and practices.

- effective recruitment of multilingual and multicultural staff
- staff composition reflecting the diversity of the client population
- service planning strategy that includes an assessment/analysis of the client demographics compared to the demographic trends of the service community
- expanded service capacity to improve the breadth and depth of services to a greater variety of cultural groups
- meaningful inclusion of clients and community members representing relevant cultural groups in decision-making and advisory governance entities, program planning, program evaluation, and research endeavors
- physical plant designed and decorated in a manner that is welcoming to the diverse cultural groups served
- engagement in advocacy to improve social issues relevant to client group
- a work climate, through formal and informal means, that addresses workforce diversity challenges and promotes respect for clients and colleagues of different backgrounds
- documented advocacy for culturally competent policies and procedures of accrediting, licensing, certification bodies, contracting agencies, and so forth
- inclusion of cultural competency as a component of human resource management in job descriptions, performance evaluations, promotions, training, and other areas.

**Standard 6. Empowerment and Advocacy**

Social workers shall be aware of the effect of social policies and programs on diverse client populations, advocating for and with clients whenever appropriate.

## Interpretation

Culturally competent social workers are keenly aware of the deleterious effects of racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism or homophobia, anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, classism, and xenophobia on clients' lives and the need for social advocacy and social action to better empower diverse clients and communities.

As first defined by Solomon (1976), *empowerment* involves facilitating the clients' connection with their own power and, in turn, being empowered by the very act of reaching across cultural barriers. Empowerment refers to the person's ability to do for themselves while advocacy implies doing for the client. Even in the act of advocacy, social workers must be careful not to impose their values on clients and must seek to understand what clients mean by advocacy. Respectful collaboration needs to take place to promote mutually agreed-on goals for change.

Social workers need a range of skills and abilities to advocate for and with clients against the underlying devaluation of cultural experiences related to difference and oppression and power and privilege in the United States. The empowerment tradition in social work practice suggests a promotion of the combined goals of consciousness raising and developing a sense of personal power and skills while working toward social change. Best practice views this as a process and outcome of the empowerment perspective (Gutiérrez, 1990; Simon, 1994). Social workers using this standard will apply an ecosystems perspective and a strengths orientation in practice. This means that workers consider client situations as they describe needs in terms of transitory challenges rather than fixed problems. According to

Gutiérrez and Lewis (1999), empowerment is a model for practice, a perspective and a set of skills and techniques. The expectation is that culturally competent social workers reflect these values in their practice.

## Indicators

### Culturally competent social workers will

1. advocate for public policies that respect the cultural values, norms, and behaviors of diverse groups and communities.
2. select appropriate intervention strategies to help colleagues, collaborating partners, and institutional representatives examine their own awareness and lack of awareness and behavioral consequences of the "isms," such as exclusionary behaviors, or oppressive policies by
  - assessing level of readiness for feedback and intervention of the dominant group member.
  - selecting either education, dialogue, increased intergroup contact, social advocacy, or social action as a strategy.
  - participating in social advocacy and social action to better empower diverse clients and communities at the local, state, and/or national level.
3. use practice methods and approaches that help the client facilitate a connection with their own power in a manner that is appropriate for their cultural context.
4. provide support to diverse cultural groups who are advocating on their own behalf.
5. partner, collaborate, and ally with client groups in advocacy efforts.
6. work to increase the client group's skills and sense of self-efficacy as social change agents.
7. demonstrate appropriate thoughtfulness regarding the role of their own personal values, particularly in terms of when to assert personal values during advocacy work and

when to avoid imposing personal values during empowerment work.

8. demonstrate intentional effort to assure that one does not impose one's own personal values in practice.

### **Standard 7. Diverse Workforce**

Social workers shall support and advocate for recruitment, admissions and hiring, and retention efforts in social work programs and agencies that ensure diversity within the profession.

#### **Interpretation**

Increasing cultural competence within the profession requires demonstrated efforts to recruit and retain a diverse cadre of social workers, many of whom would bring some “indigenous” cultural competence to the profession as well as demonstrated efforts to increase avenues for the acquisition of culturally competent skills by all social workers. Diversity should be represented at all levels of the organization, and not just among direct practitioners.

The social work profession has espoused a commitment to diversity, inclusion, and affirmative action. However, available statistics indicate that in the United States social workers are predominantly white (88.5 percent) and female (78.0 percent). The proportion of people of color has remained relatively stable in the social work membership of the National Association of Social Workers over a period of several years: 5.3 percent identify themselves as African American; Hispanics, including Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Hispanic groups constitute about 2.8 percent of the membership; Asians and Pacific Islanders 1.7 percent; and American Indians/First Nations People 0.5 percent (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997).

Social work client populations are more diverse than the social work profession itself. In many instances, service to clients is targeted to marginalized communities and special populations, groups that typically include disproportionately high numbers of people of color, elderly people, people with disabilities, and clients of lower socioeconomic status.

Matching workforce to client populations can be an effective strategy for bridging cultural differences between social worker and client, although it cannot be the only strategy. The assumption is that individuals of similar backgrounds can understand each other better and communicate more effectively (Jackson & López, 1999). Yet an equally compelling fact is that “the majority of clinicians from the mainstream dominant culture will routinely provide care for large numbers of patients of diverse ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds. Clearly increasing the numbers of culturally diverse social workers is not sufficient. Even these professionals will need to be able to provide care for patients who are not like themselves” (Jackson & López, 1999, p. 4). In addition, culturally competent social workers who bring a special skill or knowledge to the profession, like bicultural and bilingual skills, or American Sign Language (ASL) skills, are entitled to professional equity and should not be exploited for their expertise but should be appropriately compensated for skills that enhance the delivery of services to clients.

#### **Indicators**

##### **Culturally competent social workers will**

1. advocate for and support human resource policies and procedures that ensure diversity and inclusion within their organization.
2. work to achieve a workforce and organization

that reflects the demographics of the population served throughout all levels of the organization.

3. advocate for and support policies that assure equity and appropriate compensations for social workers who bring special skills or knowledge to the profession, such as bicultural and bilingual skills or American Sign Language skills.
4. advocate for and support recruitment and retention strategies that increase the diversity within the profession through social work programs and schools of social work.
5. promote and maintain the expectation that all staff, regardless of cultural membership, continuously engage in the process of improving cultural proficiency and capacity to serve a variety of populations.

#### **Culturally competent organizations will**

1. develop and implement human resource and other organizational policies, procedures, and practices that support staff diversity.
2. develop and implement policies, procedures, and practices that effectively address the dynamics of a diverse workforce.
3. regularly monitor the extent to which their management and staff composition reflect the diversity of the client population.
4. take corrective action as appropriate and refocus recruitment efforts; review their selection policies for inadvertent exclusion of the underrepresented, underserved, and oppressed cultural group.
5. regularly monitor and take remedial action as needed to ensure that client groups may receive services in their native or preferred language by
  - actively recruiting and seeking to retain multilingual staff.
  - providing “second language” courses to existing staff.

- providing appropriate compensations for social workers who bring special language skill or knowledge to the profession, such as bicultural and bilingual skills or American Sign Language skills.
6. include cultural competency as a requirement for job performance by including these requirements in job descriptions, performance evaluations, promotions, and training.
  7. foster a work climate, through formal and informal means, that addresses workforce diversity challenges and promotes respect for clients and colleagues of different backgrounds.
  8. establish cultural norms of openness and respect for discussing situations in which insensitive or exclusionary behaviors were experienced.

#### **Standard 8. Professional Education**

Social workers shall advocate for and participate in educational and training programs that help advance cultural competence within the profession.

#### **Interpretation**

Cultural competence is a vital link between the theoretical and practice knowledge base that defines social work expertise. Social work is a practice-oriented profession, and social work education and training need to keep up with and stay ahead of changes in professional practice, which includes the changing needs of diverse client populations. Diversity needs to be addressed in social work curricula and needs to be viewed as central to faculty and staff appointments and research agendas.

The social work profession should be encouraged to take steps to ensure cultural competence as an integral part of social work education, training

and practice, and to increase research and scholarship on culturally competent practice among social work professionals. This includes undergraduate, master's and doctoral programs in social work as well as post-master's training, continuing education, and meetings of the profession. Social agencies should be encouraged to provide culturally competent in-service training and opportunities for continuing education for agency-based workers. NASW should contribute to the ongoing education and training needs for all social workers, with particular emphasis on promoting culturally competent practice in continuing education offerings in terms of content, faculty, and auspice.

In addition, the NASW *Code of Ethics* clearly states, "Social workers who provide supervision and consultation are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries" (p. 14). This highlights the importance of providing culturally sensitive supervision and field instruction, as well as the pivotal role of supervisors and field instructors in promoting culturally competent practice among workers and students.

### Indicators

#### Culturally competent social workers will

1. promote professional education that advances cultural competency within the profession.
2. advocate for the infusion and integration of cultural competency standards in social work curricula and research in the BSW, MSW, and PhD levels.
3. promote and enhance culturally competent knowledge by encouraging and conducting research that develops conceptual, theoretical, and practice skills that can guide practice.
4. advocate for state-of-the-art professional

education on diversity and working with diverse populations.

5. train staff in cross-cultural communication, culturally diverse customs, and techniques for resolving racial, ethnic, or cultural conflicts between staff and the clients served.

#### Culturally competent organizations will

1. provide ongoing training, leadership, and support for improving cultural competency skills to all employees, including top management, middle management, frontline supervisors, frontline staff, and administrative/custodial staff.
2. resolve racial, ethnic, or cultural conflicts between staff and the clients served and among employees within the organization itself.
3. conduct evaluation research to determine their effectiveness in serving or interacting with culturally diverse client groups.

### Standard 9. Language Diversity

Social workers shall seek to provide and advocate for the provision of information, referrals, and services in the language appropriate to the client, which may include the use of interpreters.

#### Interpretation

Social workers should accept the individual person in his or her totality and ensure access to needed services. Language is a source and an extension of personal identity and culture and therefore, is one way individuals interact with others in their families and communities and across different cultural groups. Individuals and groups have a right to use their language in their individual and communal life.

Language diversity is a resource for society, and linguistic diversity should be preserved and promoted. The essence of the social work

profession is to promote social justice and eliminate discrimination and oppression based on linguistic or other diversities. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act clarifies the obligation of agencies and service providers to not discriminate or have methods of administering services that may subject individuals to discrimination.

Agencies and providers of services are expected to take reasonable steps to provide services and information in appropriate language other than English to ensure that people with limited English proficiency are effectively informed and can effectively participate in and benefit from its programs.

It is the responsibility of social services agencies and social workers to provide clients services in the language of their choice or to seek the assistance of qualified language interpreters. Social workers need to communicate respectfully and effectively with clients from different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds; this might include knowing the client's language. The use of language translation should be done by trained professional interpreters (for example, certified or registered sign language interpreters). Interpreters generally need proficiency in both English and the other language, as well as orientation and training.

Social agencies and social workers have a responsibility to use language interpreters when necessary, and to make certain that interpreters do not breach confidentiality, create barriers to clients when revealing personal information that is critical to their situation, are properly trained and oriented to the ethics of interpreting in a helping situation, and have fundamental knowledge of specialized terms and concepts specific to the agency's programs or activities.

## Indicators

### Culturally competent social workers will

1. demonstrate an understanding that language is part of the social identity of a client.
2. advocate for rights of individuals and groups to receive resources in their own language.
3. provide and advocate for information, referrals, and services in an appropriate language for the client.
4. provide jargon-free, easy-to-read material.
5. use descriptive and graphic representations (for example, pictures, symbol formats) for individuals with limited proficiency in the dominant language or with limited literacy in their own language.
6. advocate for the preservation and appreciation of language diversity among clients.
7. advocate for reasonable accommodations of the client's language needs, including the provision of professional sign language interpreters and translators.
8. improve their own ability to speak, read, write and understand the languages and dialects of their clients without attempting to engage in dialogue that is beyond their own skill level.
9. check to ensure accurate communication, realizing that there can be significant variations of word usage and colloquialisms within the same language family based on nationality or region.
10. prepare themselves to work effectively with interpreters and translators (for example, attend workshops, seek consultation from interpretation and translation services, become familiar with standards for professional interpretation, become familiar with techniques of translation and back-translation) and advocate for appropriate agency policies to support the effective use of and orientation for interpreters and translators.

### **Standard 10. Cross-Cultural Leadership**

Social workers shall be able to communicate information about diverse client groups to other professionals.

#### **Interpretation**

Social work is the appropriate profession to take a leadership role not only in disseminating knowledge about diverse client groups, but also in actively advocating for fair and equitable treatment of all clients served. This role should extend within and outside the profession.

Guided by the *NASW Code of Ethics*, social work leadership is the communication of vision to create proactive processes that empower individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Diversity skills, defined as sensitivity to diversity, multicultural leadership, acceptance and tolerance, cultural competence, and tolerance of ambiguity, constitute one of the core leadership skills for successful leadership (Rank & Hutchison, 2000). Social workers should come forth to assume leadership in empowering diverse client populations, to share information about diverse populations to the general public, and to advocate for their clients' concerns at interpersonal and institutional levels, locally, nationally, and internationally.

With the establishment of standards for cultural competence in social work practice, there is an equally important need for the profession to provide ongoing training in cultural competence and to establish mechanisms for the evaluation of competence-based practice. As the social work profession develops cultural competencies, then the profession must have the ability to measure those competencies. The development of out-

come measures needs to go hand in hand with the development of these standards.

#### **Indicators**

##### **Culturally competent social workers will**

1. take leadership roles and take responsibility to promote cultural competence within the social work profession.
2. take leadership roles in communicating and disseminating information on cultural competency and client diversity to other professions through activities such as serving on committees, making presentations, writing articles, developing guidelines, and conducting research.
3. take leadership roles in empowering diverse clients to assume advocacy roles within own organization and in the community.
4. advocate for fair and equitable treatment for diverse groups in and outside of profession.
5. create a proactive process that empowers individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.
6. establish strategies for people and organizations within the profession to share information and learning with one another on how to engage in culturally competent behavior and promote culturally competent practices and policies.
7. model culturally competent behavior in their interactions with client groups, other professionals, and each other.

Note: These standards build on and adhere to other standards of social work practice established by NASW, including, but not limited to, NASW Standards for the Classification of Social Work Practice, Standards for the Practice of Clinical Social Work, Standards for Social Work Case Management, Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Protection, Standards for School Social Work Services, Standards for Social Work in Health Care Settings, Standards for Social Work Personnel Practices, and Standards for Social Work Services in Long-Term Care Facilities.

Free information on the Standards is located on the NASW Web site:  
[www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org).

Purchase full document from NASW Press at 1.800.227.3590.

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
OF SOCIAL WORKERS

750 First Street, NE

Suite 700

Washington, DC 20002-4241

202.408.8600

[www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org)