Guideline on Professional Development for Continuing Competence in Social Work Practice

Introduction

Professional competence is an ethical standards issue addressed in the NASW Ethical Standards in section 1.04 on competence, in section 3.08 on continuing education and staff development, and in section 4.01 on competence. Section 4.01(b) says, “Social workers should strive to become and remain proficient in professional practice and the performance of professional functions. Social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work. Social workers should routinely review the professional literature and participate in continuing education relevant to social work practice and social work ethics.” Professional development activities of continuing education, training and study, licensure and certification, case consultation and supervised experience, and professional experience are recognized ways to establish competence.

Professional development and continuing competence have been an important responsibility for the social work employer and for the individual social worker. NASW has a standard requiring 48 hours of continuing education every two years. Supervised practice and staff-development programs have also been expected activities for social workers. However, as the private sector of the delivery system and the economics of service delivery have become more prominent, establishing, maintaining, and demonstrating professional development and continuing competence has been impacted.

Domains of Professional Functioning

There are 3 domains of functioning for a practitioner:

- the domain of professional knowledge and cognitive/conceptual functioning - including theories of human behavior, symptoms, psychopathology, social systems, practice theories, etc.;
- the domain of skills and applying knowledge to practice - including skills in interviewing, conducting a professional relationship, assessing, intervening, and
advocating for clients; and
• the domain of professional attitudes - including a professional self operating from professional values and ethics.

**Developmental Levels of Professional Functioning**
Professional development is a cumulative process in which a continually expanding knowledge base becomes increasingly operative as expanded practice skill and refined use of the professional self. Three broad levels of professional development can be identified:
• the post-graduate or entry level (LSW level);
• the autonomous or intermediate level (LCSW level); and
• the advanced and/or expert level (in supervising and case consulting, in teaching and mentoring other professionals, and in contributing to the profession at large).

Expectations regarding practice competence in each of the domains of professional functioning vary according to the individual practitioner’s level of professional development. However, each professional social worker is expected to increase and refine her or his practice knowledge and skills throughout his or her professional career through involvement in self-study, self review, review of practice outcomes, ongoing education, clinical supervision and/or consultation as appropriate. Ethical standards bind every social worker to restrict practice activities to his or her level of skill achievement, unless under clinical supervision aimed at acquiring new skills (NASW Code of Ethics, 1.04).

**Professional Development**
Professional development is a process by which a social worker increases his or her conceptual and informational knowledge, interventive skills and use of self, and professional attitudes throughout his or her career. Professional competence is an incremental process of professional development having the cumulative effect of increasing professional knowledge and skill levels.

The learning and accumulation of professional skills requires both the acquisition of an increasingly complex cognitive grasp of theory and the accumulation of guided and self-directed practice experience while engaging in self-review and appropriate supervision and/or case consultation.
**Professional Knowledge Domain**

The cumulative development of professional knowledge requires learning through professional and continuing education, practice experience, professional enrichment activities, and self-assessment. “Professional knowledge embodies the totality of cognitive grasp of theoretical concepts and wisdom gained from reflection on what is learned.” (ABE, Position Statement on Professional Development and Practice Competencies in Clinical Social Work).

**Professional Attitude Domain**

As a social worker advances through the professional development process in the attitude domain, he or she acquires a sense of professional self and a disciplined ability to use his or her self in an intentional way to facilitate client growth, mastery and independence. Professional development in the use of self requires an increasing ability to differentiate a personal from a professional self through increasing self-knowledge and awareness of one’s own limitations, and ability to deal with one’s own subjectivity as it affects relationships with clients. Clinical supervision and case consultation often focus on the social worker’s use of self in the helping relationship, and autonomous practicing social workers are expected to be aware of when to make use of case consultation.

**Professional Skill Domain**

The cumulative development of practice skills for continuing competence requires an integration of theory in practice achieved through ongoing learning and the use of clinical supervision or case consultation. Guided practice experience is an essential ingredient in learning new skills, and in expanding professional skill level.

Learning and professional development occur through the dual activities of continuing education and professional activities, and through autonomous and guided practice experience.
A Model of Professional Development
for Continuing Competence
in Social Work Practice

I. **Self-Assessment Process** - Responsibility for monitoring one’s own need for development of knowledge, skill and attitudes resides with each individual social worker. And, each social worker is responsible for identifying the content and direction of continuing education, and self-study and the need for case consultation or clinical supervision to promote his or her continuing professional development and to acquire new skills and methods. Self-knowledge and professional self-awareness are essential for autonomous professional functioning, and they enable a social worker to identify learning needs and to develop a plan for establishing and maintaining continuing competence in his or her current and future context of practice. Involvement in professional activities and awareness of professional issues also contribute to an understanding of advances in professional knowledge and applications, and help a social worker to identify and focus learning for current practice.

A social worker should also seek and incorporate in-put from practice supervisors, case consultants, mentors and colleagues. Case and practice reviews with these varying professionals should point to new areas and needs for professional development.

II. **A Continuing Professional Development Plan** should be written biennially and reviewed and may be modified as needed. The Plan may identify learning objectives related to but not exclusive of:

- **current areas of practice focus and expertise** (eg. adolescents in transition, trauma survivors, discharge planning, case management, board development, etc); and/or
- **new areas of interest and direction in practice** (eg. field of aging, crisis intervention, supervising, teaching, grant writing, etc.); and/or
- **advances in professional knowledge in area of practice** (eg. neurobiology in trauma, attachment issues, etc.); and/or
- **changes in intervention approaches** related to his or her practice focus (eg. DBT, CBT, use of cognitive-behavioral approaches or mindfulness training, coalition building, etc); and/or
• individual and personal issues related to professional functioning (e.g. use of self, countertransference reactions, etc.).

The written plan for continuing professional development may be reviewed with a clinical supervisor or case consultant. If it is legally required, the clinical supervisor should sign the plan. Input from an on-going case consultant is not required, but is recommended. See NASWCO Guidelines for Supervision and Consultation and Rule 9 of the Social Work Board of Examiners regarding the distinction between a clinical supervisor and a case consultant.

Plans are to be kept by the individual social worker.

III. Professional development activities should be identified to address the individual learning objectives. These activities may include a combination of continuing education, guided professional practice experience (supervision or consultation), peer consultation, self and home study, publishing and teaching activities, and contributions to the profession. Acceptable continuing education activities should focus on practice and relate to the identified professional development plan of the social worker.

Forty-eight contact hours (48 CEC’s) of professional development activities should take place over a two year period of social work practice. One Continuing Education Credit (1 CEC) is one hour of classroom learning, or one article or chapter of reading for self-study or preparation for teaching, or one page of an article prepared for publication, or one hour of practice supervision or practice consultation with a qualified supervisor or consultant.

Activities which promote professional development and maintain continuing competence include the following: continuing education, clinical supervision or case consultation, supervision or consultation directly related to social work activities, and teaching, publishing and preparation activities:

Continuing Education Activities such as:

• Practice oriented Seminars, and
• Practice oriented Workshops;
• Speakers presenting at professional meetings discussing social work practice;
In-service activities focused on developing or enhancing social work knowledge or practice;
- Peer-group meetings and Study groups focused on practice;
- “Home-study” courses using electronic media or written material;
- Distance learning over the internet; and
- Self-study applied to the individual’s practice.

Formal Continuing Education may be offered by professional societies and associations, continuing education providers and programs, employer based programs and clinical training, and graduate professional schools.

**Clinical Supervision or Case Consultation** aimed at learning new skills, advancing practice skills, professional development and/or maintaining continuing practice competence may include:
- Clinical Supervision, individual or in small groups;
- Case Consultation, individual or in small groups, may be single session or on-going;
- Peer Consultation, individual or in small groups, may be single session or on-going;
- Case Presentations to social work and/or allied professionals.

Case consultations are recommended for independently practicing social workers and should be obtained on an as needed or regular basis. Clinical supervision and case consultation should be offered by a qualified social worker or other advanced licensed clinical professional. See NASWCO Guidelines for Supervision and Consultation and Licensing Board requirements in Rule 9, 17.

**Supervision or Consultation** related to other social work activities aimed at enhancing and developing social work skills. Activities may include: service delivery; management and administration; program development and evaluation; research; community organization and development; or social policy analysis and development.
- Supervision may be individual or in small groups;
- Consultation may be individual or in small groups, and may be single session or on-going;
- Peer Consultation individually or in small groups may be single session or on-going.
Teaching, Publishing, and Preparation

- Teaching for the first time a social work practice or related course at a college or higher level or a continuing education workshop;
- Writing a practice related article for publication; and/or
- Self-study and Preparation for teaching.

IV. Demonstration through documentation of participation in and application of learning/professional development activities is necessary.

Documentation may include: course or workshop outlines, topics covered, learning goals/objectives of the activity, and marketing materials; Certificates of Continuing Education (CEC’s) or Attendance; or lists of articles or chapters read; or signed attestation by a supervisor, consultant, or practitioner.

Each social worker is responsible for maintaining records of continuing development activities and must abide by the Rules and Regulations of the Social Work Licensing Board. Random auditing by the Board of Social Work Examiners may require demonstration of the professional development activities and the related professional development objectives.

A lists of professional development activities should be kept by the individual social worker to demonstrate actions taken to address learning objectives. Documentation may include the following information:

- For Continuing Education Activities, the Title/Subject, date and time, presenter with credentials, certificate, brochure or marketing materials with goals/objectives of the activity;
- For Supervision or Consultation, a statement indicating the dates and hours of activity, and identified learning goals;
- For Self-study an annotated list of readings;
- For Peer Consultation dates and hours of activity, the topics covered, and the professionals in attendance;
- For Teaching, Publishing, and Preparation, the topic, a course outline or marketing materials, the articles or chapters read in preparation.

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