

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

NASW Standards for

School  
Social Work

Services



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**Contents**

5	Introduction
7	Definitions
10	Standards for Professional Practice
17	Standards for Professional Preparation and Development
22	Standards for Administrative Structure and Support
28	Ethical Principles

## Introduction

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In 1943 the National Association of Visiting Teachers (NAVT) became the American Association of School Social Workers (AASSW), and in 1955 AASSW merged with six other social work associations to form the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Thus, school social work has long been a vital part of the social work profession.

Recognition of the rights of people with disabilities; changes in the family unit; and the effects of increasing social, economic, and academic pressures on children are some of the forces that have significantly shaped school social work services. The value of school social work intervention has increasingly been recognized through federal and state legislative initiatives.

In 1978 NASW developed Standards for School Social Work Services that have served as guidelines to the development of school social work. Because it is essential that these standards reflect and promote professionally sound practice, they have been revised, first in 1992 and again in 2002, to reflect changing practices and policies.

These standards will be met only through the combined efforts of concerned educators, school social workers, and community leaders who are

willing to provide the leadership and teamwork necessary to ensure high-quality professional services to schools, students, and families.

For many school systems, these standards will reinforce current practices. For others, they will provide a challenge and a goal to be achieved. For school social workers, they both validate the uniqueness and diversity of school social work as a specialty practice area and affirm the value of school social work in enabling students to achieve maximum benefits from their educational experiences.

## Definitions

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The following terms are defined for purposes of this document.

**Case management.** Organizing, coordinating, and sustaining activities and services designed to optimize the functioning of students and/or families.

**Competence.** The synthesis of professional behaviors that integrate knowledge, skills, and activities in the performance of the tasks of school social work. Competence in school social work includes all relevant educational and experiential requirements, demonstrated ability through meeting licensing and certification requirements, and the ability to carry out work assignments and achieve goals while adhering to the values and the code of ethics of the profession.

**Certified school social work specialist.** A social worker meeting the requirements for a School Social Work Specialist certification issued by the National Association of Social Workers.

**Credentialed or licensed school social worker.** A social worker meeting the requirements for a school social worker as established by the state board of education or other state entity that licenses or certifies educational personnel, or professional social workers.

**Cultural competence.** Congruent behaviors, attitudes, and skills enabling an individual to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

**Ecological perspective.** The perspective of the interaction of the child and family and their

environment. Important concepts include adaptation, transactions, goodness of fit between the students and their educational environments, reciprocity, and mutuality.

**Family.** The parent(s), guardian, custodian, or other person acting in loco parentis of a child.

**Functional behavioral assessment.** An approach to assessment that enhances understanding of the purpose and effect of the behavior(s) of concern and provides information that is useful in the development of effective interventions.

**Human services.** Programs and activities designed to enhance people's development and well-being. Basic human services include personal social services, health, education, housing, income, and justice and public safety.

**Local education agency.** The local public agency responsible for operating the educational program. In some states, responsibility for provision of special education programs has been assigned to entities called intermediate units, area education agencies, educational service units, and so forth.

**Mediation.** A collaborative problem-solving process in which a neutral third party guides a discussion intended to help the parties in the dispute define the issues, obtain relevant information, and generate reasonable options for resolution.

**Practice modalities.** Specific treatment interventions used by the school social worker or other practitioner to help the student, family, or other identified client system reach a desired goal or outcome. Intervention strategies may include casework; group work; individual, group, or family counseling

or therapy; community organization; crisis intervention; advocacy; staff training; policy development; and program coordination.

**Prevention.** Efforts undertaken by school social workers and others to minimize or eliminate the social, psychological, or other conditions known to cause or contribute to physical and emotional illness and some socioeconomic problems. Prevention efforts may include actions taken by school social workers and others that would prevent problems from occurring (primary prevention); limit the extent or severity of the problem (secondary prevention); or assist in recuperating from the effects of the problem and developing sufficient strengths and skills to preclude its return (tertiary prevention).

**Professional practice.** The ethical principles, provision of services, and responsibilities that school social workers are expected to maintain.

**School social work.** Social work services provided in the setting of an educational agency by credentialed or licensed school social workers. This specialty in social work is oriented toward helping students make satisfactory adjustments and coordinating and influencing the efforts of the school, the family, and the community to achieve this goal.

**Student.** Any person legally mandated by the state to be enrolled in an educational program or eligible to be enrolled.

## Standards for Professional Practice

For the purposes of this document professional practice relates to the ethical principles, provision of services, and responsibilities that school social workers are expected to maintain. The term “local education agency” is used throughout this document to refer to any local or regional public education system and is consistent with the wording of federal legislation.

### Standard 1

**A school social worker shall demonstrate commitment to the values and ethics of the social work profession and shall use NASW’s Code of Ethics as a guide to ethical decision making.**

The school social worker shall demonstrate a recognition of basic human rights, including the right of students to human services; a willingness to act on professional judgment and convictions, and be informed by the NASW Code of Ethics; and the recognition that change is constant and requires school social workers to remain current by continuously scrutinizing and improving theory, policy, and practice.

As integral staff of local education agencies, school social workers have a responsibility to know and comply with local, state, and federal legislation, regulations, and policies. In the event that conflicts arise among competing expectations, school social workers are directed to the NASW Code of Ethics as a tool in their decision making.

### Standard 2

**School social workers shall organize their time, energies, and workloads to fulfill their**

**responsibilities and complete assignments of their position, with due consideration of the priorities among their various responsibilities.**

School social workers must manage their work in an efficient and effective manner. Priorities for practice must be developed collaboratively between the school social worker and his or her supervisor. Priorities should be established on the basis of their effect on student needs, the professional skills of the school social worker, program needs, and the availability of other resources. School social workers shall make use of technology systems in the local education agency to enhance communication, obtain and organize information, and demonstrate accountability.

### Standard 3

**School social workers shall provide consultation to local education agency personnel, school board members, and community representatives to promote understanding and effective utilization of school social work services.**

School social workers provide consultation to facilitate an understanding of factors in the home, local education agency, and community that affect students’ educational experiences. They also serve as consultants on such issues as discipline, attendance, confidentiality, race, ethnicity and language, mental health, behavior management, crisis intervention, and child abuse and neglect.

School social workers shall constantly be aware of the overall goals, objectives, and tasks of their specialty area and interpret them to local education agency personnel, so that the primary professional activities and competencies of school social workers are maintained.

**Standard 4**

**School social workers shall ensure that students and their families are provided services within the context of multicultural understanding and competence that enhance families' support of students' learning experiences.**

Increasing diversity in U.S. classrooms requires that school social workers increase their awareness and appreciation of cultural differences. School social workers must develop competencies that include heightened self-awareness, knowledge, and practice skills consistent with the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice.\* They must also recognize racial and ethnic barriers within the local education agency and develop strategies to lessen and overcome these barriers on students and improve the climate of the local education agency.

**Standard 5**

**School social work services shall be extended to students in ways that build students' individual strengths and offer students maximum opportunity to participate in the planning and direction of their own learning experience.**

In developing a plan of action, school social workers must consider the characteristics of an individual student and the capacity of all students to communicate about themselves, to choose among options, and to be involved in directing their own learning.

**Standard 6**

**School social workers shall help empower students and their families to gain access to and effectively use formal and informal community resources.**

Empowerment is based on the principle of using student and family strengths and structure to enable families to function as advocates for themselves. It is particularly appropriate for school social workers to identify and collaborate with individuals who function as formal or informal leaders in their communities to develop and enhance the natural helping networks that can complement the formal services of the local education agency and community agencies.

**Standard 7**

**School social workers shall maintain adequate safeguards for the privacy and confidentiality of information.**

School social workers must be familiar and comply with the various local, state, and federal mandates related to confidentiality. Professional judgment in the use of confidential information shall be based on best practice, legal, and ethical considerations. Students, families, and other professionals should be informed of the confidentiality limitations and requirements when services are initiated.

**Standard 8**

**School social workers shall advocate for students and their families in a variety of situations.**

Issues of concern affecting students may include limited educational opportunities; discipline; punitive, arbitrary, and exclusionary policies and procedures in schools; institutional racism; discrimination against and among students based on protected classifications such as race, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, and religion; homophobia; and sexism. Advocacy should support the needs of students who are immigrants and refugees, students who are homeless, students living

with HIV/AIDS, students with substance abuse problems, and other at-risk student populations. Effective advocacy can best be accomplished when school social workers are informed about court decisions, legislation, rules and regulations, and policies and procedures that affect school social work practice.

**Standard 9**

**As leaders and members of interdisciplinary teams and coalitions, school social workers shall work collaboratively to mobilize the resources of local education agencies and communities to meet the needs of students and families.**

As team leaders and members, school social workers initiate and support activities to overcome institutional barriers and gaps in services. School social workers must demonstrate trust, open communication, mutual respect, ongoing collaboration, and effective coordination to facilitate the achievement of the interdisciplinary team objectives. The unique contribution of the school social worker to the interdisciplinary team is to bring home, school, and community perspectives to the interdisciplinary process.

**Standard 10**

**School social workers shall develop and provide training and educational programs that address the goals and mission of the educational institution.**

School social workers shall provide training programs for parents, teachers, other local education agency personnel, and the staff of community agencies. These programs may involve teamwork and collaboration with other

disciplines. Content should address the prevention, intervention, and remediation factors that affect students' success in school.

School social workers shall support the academic standards of their school districts. This is accomplished through services to prepare students for learning and the actual teaching of social and behavioral skills.

**Standard 11**

**School social workers shall maintain accurate data that are relevant to planning, management, and evaluation of school social work services.**

Timely and accurate records document school social work services, demonstrate outcomes, and promote accountability to the local education agency and community. Analyses of activity reports, program statistics, and outcome measures can support the effective use of school social work services to better meet the needs of students and families.

**Standard 12**

**School social workers shall conduct assessments of student needs that are individualized and provide information that is directly useful for designing interventions that address behaviors of concern.**

Assessments should take an ecological perspective, focusing on the students, as well as their interactions in the school environment, at home, and in community settings. A functional approach to assessment enhances understanding of the purpose and effect of problematic behaviors and provides information for developing interventions.

### Standard 13

**School social workers shall incorporate assessments in developing and implementing intervention and evaluation plans that enhance students' abilities to benefit from educational experiences.**

Plans are based on assessments relevant to the concerns in the referral and include goals, objectives, and interventions to achieve desired outcomes; methods of evaluation; and outcome criteria. Plans are designed to enhance positive educational experiences and involve the student, the family, other team members, and school and community resources as appropriate.

### Standard 14

**School social workers, as systems change agents, shall identify areas of need that are not being addressed by the local education agency and community and shall work to create services that address these needs.**

School social workers shall initiate activities to address deficiencies in resources and services of the local education agency or community that affect the ability of students to benefit from the educational system. Advocacy should include leadership on committees and advisory boards at the local, state, and national levels.

### Standard 15

**School social workers shall be trained in and use mediation and conflict-resolution strategies to promote students' resolution of their nonproductive encounters in the school and community and to promote productive relationships.**

Attempts are often made to resolve conflicts and impasses between parents and the local education agency through formal, costly, and often adversarial due process procedures. Mediation and conflict resolution are effective strategies that school social workers should use both to undo the results of nonproductive encounters among students, parents, and school and agency personnel and to build positive, collaborative relationships. School social workers are, by training and experience, well suited to these roles and should seek opportunities to engage in these processes.

## Standards for Professional Preparation and Development

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Professional preparation defines the level of training required for school social work practice. Professional development refers to the enhancement of basic knowledge and skills that requires ongoing effort by school social workers.

### Standard 16

**School social workers shall meet the provisions for practice set by NASW.**

School social workers shall have a graduate degree in social work from a program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). As a distinct specialty within the social work profession, school social work requires specialized knowledge and understanding of educational systems. The school social worker should actively seek this specialized training when the CSWE accredited program does not provide it.

**Standard 17**

**School social workers shall possess knowledge and understanding basic to the social work profession.**

School social workers shall have an understanding of human behavior in the social environment and be skilled in implementing various practice modalities to help empower disadvantaged and oppressed populations. School social workers shall use research to inform practice and understand social policies related to services in schools.

**Standard 18**

**School social workers shall understand the backgrounds and broad range of experiences that shape students' approaches to learning.**

School social workers shall be knowledgeable about child development and biological factors that affect students' ability to function effectively in school. School social workers shall understand the influence of socioeconomic status, gender, culture, disability, and sexual orientation on educational opportunities for students. School social workers also shall understand how emphasizing students' strengths and protective factors can enhance educational success.

**Standard 19**

**School social workers shall possess knowledge and understanding of the organization and structure of the local education agency.**

School social workers shall understand the historical and current perspectives of public school education at the local, state, and national levels, including educational reform and legislation affecting educational opportunity, problems, and policy issues. In addition, school social workers

shall be knowledgeable about the financial base of the local education agency, the nature and scope of its authority, and the politics of school-community relations. School social workers also shall be knowledgeable about approaches to teaching and learning, including standards-based curricula, and the roles and areas of competence of various professionals in the local education agency.

**Standard 20**

**School social workers shall possess knowledge and understanding of the reciprocal influences of home, school, and community.**

School social workers shall be knowledgeable about how family dynamics, health, wellness, and mental health; and social welfare policies, programs, and resources in the community affect students' success in the school environment.

**Standard 21**

**School social workers shall possess skills in systematic assessment and investigation.**

School social workers shall gather data using multiple methods and sources to assess the needs, characteristics, and interactions of students, families, local education agency personnel, individuals, and groups in the neighborhood and community. When appropriate, school social workers shall collect information to document and assess aspects of the biological, medical, psychological, cultural, sociological, emotional, legal, and environmental factors that affect students' learning. School social workers shall integrate biopsychosocial assessment data into reports that include educationally relevant recommendations as well as performance objectives and measurable outcomes as needed.

**Standard 22**

**School social workers shall understand the relationship between practice and policies affecting students.**

School social workers shall be knowledgeable about current and proposed policies, analyze their effect on students, and advocate for policies that maximize student success.

**Standard 23**

**School social workers shall be able to select and apply empirically validated or promising prevention and intervention methods to enhance students' educational experiences.**

School social workers shall possess skills to assess problems and determine whether interventions should occur at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level. School social work practice should be based on empirically supported interventions.

**Standard 24**

**School social workers shall be able to evaluate their practice and disseminate the findings to consumers, the local education agency, the community, and the profession.**

Using scholarly literature or program research designs, school social workers shall evaluate interventions and share findings with consumers, local education agency administrators, the community, and other school social workers through in-service training, conferences, and professional publications.

**Standard 25**

**School social workers shall possess skills in developing coalitions at the local, state, and national levels that promote student success.**

School social workers shall be able to work with individuals, groups, and organizations that have diverse interests, but whose common purpose is to develop programs or systems of care that support and enhance the health, social and emotional well-being, and safety of students.

**Standard 26**

**School social workers shall be able to promote collaboration among community health and mental health services providers and facilitate student access to these services.**

School social workers shall support the development and implementation of comprehensive school-based and school-linked programs (for example, full-service schools, full-service community schools, family resource centers, community schools, school-based health clinics) that promote student health and mental health. School social workers shall be able to address issues such as information sharing and accountability and shall be able to coordinate community resources that support student success.

**Standard 27**

**School social workers shall assume responsibility for their own continued professional development in accordance with the NASW Standards for Continuing Professional Education\* and state requirements.**

To practice effectively, school social workers must remain knowledgeable of reforms in education and best practice models in the social work profession. Opportunities for enhancing professional identity and development include participation and leadership in NASW and other professional organizations and coalitions at local, state, and national levels; participation in and contribution to professional

conferences, training events, and other activities; and assisting in the ongoing development of the school social work knowledge base by contributing to and promoting professional publications.

#### **Standard 28**

**School social workers shall contribute to the development of the profession by educating and supervising school social work interns.**

School social workers may provide field instruction through the supervision of school social work interns and through the provision of other appropriate learning experiences in relation to school social work practice.

### **Standards for Administrative Structure and Support**

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An effective school social work program must have adequate administrative structure and support. NASW recommends that the local education agency use the following standards, along with state and federal guidelines, to develop a school social work program.

#### **Standard 29**

**State departments of education or other state entities that license or certify educational personnel shall regulate school social work practice.**

To ensure competent provision of school social work services, state departments of education or other state entities that license or certify educational personnel should make sure that the credentials of individuals charged with providing these services adhere to the standards of practice and are reciprocal and uniform.

#### **Standard 30**

**State departments of education or other state entities that license or certify educational personnel shall employ a state school social work consultant who is a credentialed and experienced school social worker.**

State education agencies are responsible for providing local education agencies with leadership and technical assistance to ensure all students an equal opportunity to achieve optimal success in the educational environment. State education agencies should provide a school social work consultant to collaborate with other service programs within the state education agency and other state agencies; influence legislative and regulatory efforts related to education; represent the state in regional, state, and national activities related to school social work; ensure that school social work programs are integrated with other school programs statewide; provide technical assistance to local education agencies in the development and implementation of school social work programs; provide leadership and technical assistance in the development of practice and credentialing standards for school social workers; and advocate for inclusion of school social work programs and services at the local education agency level.

#### **Standard 31**

**School social work services shall be provided by credentialed school social workers employed by the local education agency.**

School social work services should be provided by individuals designated as credentialed school social workers and employed by local education

agencies. Local education agencies should ensure that school social work services are aligned with educational goals and integrated with other school support services.

**Standard 32**

**Local education agencies shall employ school social workers with the highest level of qualifications for entry-level practitioners.**

A master of social work (MSW) degree is the recommended entry-level qualification for school social work. When the local education agency employs school social workers whose highest degree is a bachelor of social work (BSW) in addition to school social workers with the MSW degree, tasks should be assigned differentially. Assignments must take into account levels of education and demonstrated competence and be consistent with the legal regulation of professional social work practice within a given state. Both the MSW degree and the BSW degree should be received from a program accredited by CSWE.

**Standard 33**

**Social workers in schools shall be designated "school social workers."**

"School social worker" is the position title that correctly identifies the educational background, profession, and function of a social worker employed by the local education agency. Other titles, such as "attendance officer," "pupil personnel worker," "home and school visitor," "home-school coordinator," "visiting teacher," "family collaborative worker," "family specialist," or "home-family specialist," project incomplete or misleading notions of the school social worker's qualifications and functions.

**Standard 34**

**Salaries and job classifications of school social workers shall be commensurate with their education, experience, and responsibilities and be comparable to similarly qualified professional personnel employed by the local education agency.**

Procedures used in setting school social workers' salaries must be equitable and responsive to the levels of education, experience, and responsibilities of the school social workers.

**Standard 35**

**The administrative structure established by the local education agency shall provide for appropriate school social work supervision.**

The local education agency is responsible for administrative and professional supervision to ensure high-quality services. Supervision of school social work programs should be provided by credentialed and experienced MSW school social workers.

**Standard 36**

**The administrative structure of the local education agency shall delineate clear lines of support and accountability for the school social work program.**

The administrative structure and organization of the local education agency should provide for optimum use of school social work knowledge and skills. Realistic job descriptions, working conditions, and workload standards are essential, as is a mechanism for regular review of goals, objectives, accomplishments, and accountability procedures of the school social work program.

Designation of a lead social worker can help promote appropriate support and accountability.

**Standard 37**

**The local education agency shall provide a professional work setting that allows school social workers to practice effectively.**

School social workers require basic work resources to ensure privacy and confidentiality for students and families. These basic resources include an office; clerical support; up-to-date information technology; an adequate budget for professional materials, supplies, and activities; and adequate space at each school site for meeting with students, families, and local education agency personnel.

**Standard 38**

**The local education agency shall provide opportunities for school social workers to engage in professional development activities that support school social work practice.**

Funding support and an adequate number of professional leave days enable school social workers to strengthen and broaden skills required to better serve students, families, the local education agency, and the community.

**Standard 39**

**The goals, objectives, and tasks of a school social work program shall be clearly and directly related to the mission of the local education agency and the educational process.**

School social workers are expected to support and help facilitate educational reforms and initiatives, particularly those that emphasize

prevention, early intervention, parent education and involvement, service integration, partnerships, and support for student transitions.

**Standard 40**

**The local education agency shall involve school social workers in developing and coordinating partnerships with community health, mental health, and social services providers linked with or based at school sites to ensure that these services promote student educational success.**

Because of their extensive knowledge of community resources, school social workers should play a critical role in facilitating the provision of community services in the local education agency. School social workers help build effective school-community teams at school sites by addressing issues such as roles, responsibilities, and supervision of team members, and by developing procedures to ensure confidentiality, documentation, and accountability. School social workers also help orient community providers to school climate, culture, and structure, and to the laws and regulations governing practice in educational settings.

**Standard 41**

**All programs incorporating school social work services shall require ongoing evaluation to determine their contribution to the educational success of all students.**

Through ongoing evaluation, school social workers demonstrate accountability to the students and families they serve, the educational system and community, and the standards and ethics of the social work profession. Methods used to evaluate social work practice should be assessed periodically

to ensure that objectives, activities, and measured outcomes are aligned with the local education agency's goals. School social work documentation should be reviewed periodically to ensure accurate recording of functions, tasks, activities, and measured outcomes.

#### Standard 42

**The local education agency shall establish and implement a school social work-student population ratio to ensure reasonable work-load expectations.**

The local education agency shall provide a level of school social work services that is sufficient to address the nature and extent of student needs. Appropriate ratios for school social work staff to students should depend on the characteristics and needs of the student population to be served. Each local or state education agency should establish adequate levels and types of school social work services on the basis of comprehensive needs assessment data.

### Ethical Principles

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The following broad ethical principles are based on social work's core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These principles set forth ideals to which all social workers should aspire.

#### Value: Service

**Ethical Principle: Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.**

Social workers elevate service to others above

self-interest. Social workers draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems. Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service).

#### Value: Social Justice

**Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice.**

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

#### Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person

**Ethical Principle: Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.**

Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination. Social workers seek to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs. Social workers are cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society. They seek to resolve conflicts between clients' interests and the broader society's interests in a socially responsible manner consistent with the values,

ethical principles, and ethical standards of the profession.

**Value: Importance of Human Relationships**

**Ethical Principle: Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.**

Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.

**Value: Integrity**

**Ethical Principle: Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.**

Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

**Value: Competence**

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

Social workers 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.

These ethical principles are part of the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers, approved by the 1996 NASW Delegate Assembly and revised by the 1999 NASW Delegate Assembly. The complete text of the Code is available on request from NASW or at [www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org).

\*The complete text of the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice and the NASW Standards for Continuing Professional Education is available on request from NASW or at [www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org).

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