

Clinical Social Work Described

Clinical social work is a healthcare profession based on theories and methods of prevention and treatment in providing mental-health/healthcare services, with special focus on behavioral and bio-psychosocial problems and disorders. Clinical social work's unique attributes include use of the person-in-environment perspective, respect for the primacy of client rights, and strong therapeutic alliance between client and practitioner. With 200,000 practitioners serving millions of client consumers, clinical social workers constitute the largest group of mental-health/healthcare providers in the nation.

The knowledge base of clinical social work includes theories of biological, psychological, and social development; diversity and cultural competency; interpersonal relationships; family and group dynamics; mental disorders; addictions; impacts of illness, trauma, or injury; and the effects of the physical, social, and cultural environment. This knowledge is inculcated in social work graduate school and is fused with direct-practice skills that are developed by the practitioner during a period of at least two years of post-graduate experience under clinical supervision. This period should suffice to prepare the clinical social worker for autonomous practice and state-licensure as a clinical social work professional. In the years that follow, clinical social workers may pursue an advanced-generalist practice or may decide to specialize in one or more areas.

Clinical social work is notable for the versatility of its practitioners and the variety of their roles, including that of team member and team leader in a multi-disciplinary setting. Client consumers—individuals, couples, families, and groups—benefit from a variety of direct services, including assessment, diagnosis, treatment planning, intervention/treatment, evaluation of outcomes, and case management. Clinical social work settings and services include, but are not limited to, the following (in alphabetical order):

- child & family services
- clinics
- court & forensic venues
- elder care facilities
- home health care
- hospice
- hospitals
- not-for-profit agencies and organizations
- palliative and rehabilitative care
- private practice offices
- public & private schools
- public sector health/mental health
- rehabilitation facilities
- religious/spiritual organizations
- residential treatment
- rural healthcare
- social services agencies
- uniformed services and Veterans Affairs.

The flexible and skillful application of knowledge, theories, and methods in a bio-psychosocial approach are hallmarks of clinical social work. Interventions—the direct person-to-person(s) process—are conducted with people of all ages and range in nature from preventive, crisis, and psycho-educational services to collaborative client advocacy and brief and long-term counseling or psychotherapy. Typically, clinical social workers supervise and consult with professional colleagues and may engage in indirect practice (e.g. administration, research, teaching, writing). It is a standard of practice for clinical social workers to engage in career-long continuing clinical education and to adhere to a professional code of ethics.