

**California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) Aging Initiative:
Aging Competencies**

January 2006

BACKGROUND

The CalSWEC Aging Initiative (AI) of 2004 established the Aging Sub-Committee and with it an initial mandate to specify aging social work competencies. These were to be aligned with the successful CalSWEC Child Welfare Curriculum Model and the new CalSWEC Mental Health (2004) Competencies. The CalSWEC AI has the goal of preparing social workers to provide effective interventions of the highest quality to California elders within the aging network encompassing health, mental health, and social services.

Nationally and specifically in California, a foundation for the CalSWEC aging competencies had been laid through the accomplishments of the *Hartford Foundation Geriatric Social Work Initiative*. California Schools of Social Work had been awarded multiple Hartford grants. Included were two Practicum Partnership Programs (PPP): the Southern California Geriatric Social Work Education Consortium (GSWEC; composed of four Schools of Social Work), and the Northern California Social Work Consortium (composed of three Schools of Social Work). Also included were seven Schools of Social Work identified as GeroRich sites. In 2004, ten additional California Schools were awarded aging curriculum development grants from the Hartford National Gero-Ed Center. The competency-driven models and curriculum tools developed by these Schools were presented at the CalSWEC Aging Summit and the feedback from the 109 Summit delegates was instrumental in the development of the CalSWEC Aging Competencies.

The CalSWEC Aging Competencies are the result of a census-building approach utilized by the Curriculum Workgroup. Initially, a literature review including the Geriatric Social Work White Papers was conducted. The PPP Geriatric Social Work Competency Scale II (<http://www.socialworkleadership.org/sw/work/ppp.php>) used for measuring advanced practice skills in aging (Damron-Rodriguez, in press) had recently been adopted and adapted to competency goals by the CSWE GeroED Center (<http://depts.washington.edu/geroctr/index.html>). As a result of the literature review and national adoption, these 40 competencies were used as a foundation for the CalSWEC Aging Competencies. Each of the 40 items were reviewed and sorted in accordance with CalSWEC Curriculum Competencies format. The CalSWEC format stipulates that Curriculum Competencies should address four distinct sections: 1) attention to cultural diversity and disadvantage and culturally competent social work, 2) social work practice across lifespan, 3) human behavior and social environment for older adults, and 4) social welfare policy and administration for the older adults. Furthermore, the CalSWEC format is divided in each of the four sections into foundation (1st year) and advanced (2nd year) competencies. Additional skill and content recommendations were added as edification for the CalSWEC Aging Curriculum. Competencies were adapted from the nationally adopted list by differentiating foundation and advanced levels of the essential skill content in order to create a CalSWEC Aging Framework. .

Finally, a refined version of the CalSWEC Aging Competencies was distributed to approximately 209 community stakeholders for their inputs and comments on the competencies. The community stakeholders include the 2004 Aging Summit delegates, County Welfare Directors' Association (CWDA), Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work, and CalSWEC AI committee members. A total of 80 community stakeholders provided comments and suggestions. After a review of all

stakeholder responses the following are the proposed CalSWEC Aging Competencies presented in the CalSWEC format. This work and further aging curriculum development in California Schools of Social Work is partially supported by a grant from the Archstone Foundation.

CalSWEC Aging Competencies Framework
Foundation Competencies (First Year)
I. Age, Diversity, and Disadvantage
II. Core Foundation Practice with Older Adults
III. Aging, Human Behavior and the Social Environment
IV. Aging Social Welfare Policy and Administration
Advanced Competencies (Second Year)
V. Culturally Competent Social Work Practice in Aging
VI. Advanced Practice with Older Adults
VII. Perspectives on Aging, Human Behavior and the Social Environment
VIII. Advanced Aging Social Welfare Policy and Administration

CalSWEC Aging Practice Definition and Curriculum Principles

PRACTICE DEFINITION

CalSWEC AI chooses the term, “**Aging Competencies**” to indicate that practice with older adults encompasses both geriatric and gerontological social work. CalSWEC adopts the definition of aging social work practice articulated by the U.S. Bureau of Health Professions in the Geriatric Social Work White Paper (Berkman, Dobrof, Damron-Rodriguez, and Harry, 1997). This definition of social work with older adults was modified from the National Association of Social Worker’s Standards for Classification of Social Work Practice to focus on older adults.

Professionally responsible intervention to 1) enhance the developmental, problem solving, and coping capacities of *older people and their families*; 2) promote the effective and humane operating of systems that provide resources and services to *older people and their families*; 3) link *older people* with systems that provide them with resources, services and opportunities; and 4) contribute to the development and improvement of social policies *that support persons throughout the lifespan*. (Italics are words added to focus on aging)

This definition of aging social work encompasses direct practice, community organization, and policy levels of social work, thus aiming at skills required to work with older adults at both the micro and macro levels of practice. This definition is both gerontological practice with an emphasis on late life growth and development, as well as geriatrically grounded practice to meet the needs of older adults for health, mental health, and human services.

CURRICULUM PRINCIPLES

1. The goal of services for older people is to maintain independence; optimize physical, psychological, and social functioning; and maximize the quality of life.
2. Services for older persons should be guided by the individual’s goals, strengths, needs, and concerns, with appreciation for the interconnectedness among physical, psychological, and social aspects of well-being.
3. Family relationships should be respected and fostered, with the goal of strengthening reciprocal bonds, enabling family care over time, and preventing undue hardship.
4. The growing diversity of the older population in ethnicity, language, culture, and immigration status must be reflected in culturally competent staff and program design.
5. Racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination influence the opportunities of individuals over the life course and systems of care for older people must address the needs of those who have been marginalized or disadvantaged during their lives.
6. Older persons have the right to live in their homes and communities as long as possible supported by community services.
7. Older persons whose cognitive capacity is diminished should be provided with legally mandated, humane, and protective services from family or public systems.
8. Services across a full continuum should be available, accessible, coordinated, timely, and effective.

CalSWEC Aging Competencies

Foundation Competencies First Year

I. Age, Diversity, and Disadvantage

All social work students should have the knowledge of self as it relates to ageism as well as racism and sexism. Social work student's practice foundation must incorporate the perspective of the late life impact of inequality based on disadvantage over the life course. A strength-based perspective recognizes the positive benefits of ethnic/ cultural values and social supports for older persons. Culturally sensitive social work practice must lead to the ability to work with and on behalf of diverse groups of older persons.

- 1.1 Identify and assess one's own values and biases regarding aging and, as necessary, take steps to dispel myths about aging.
 - a. Recognize ageism and its impacts on person's late life opportunities to engage in meaningful ways in society.
 - b. Identify the way in which age is socially constructed and the differences in social cohorts.
- 1.2 Recognize inequality in the aging experience as it relates to gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, functional ability and class.
 - a. Understand the impact of race/ethnicity, poverty and class on the aging process.
 - b. Understand challenges and hardships faced by older women particularly older women of color.
 - c. Understand the socio-historical context of individual's sexual orientation.
- 1.3 Address respectfully the diversity of cultural, spiritual, and ethnic values and beliefs of older adults and families.
 - a. Identify and critically evaluate how one's own cultural beliefs may positively or negatively impact one's practice with ethnic elders, as well as the capacity to act according to professional ethics.
 - b. Understand the roles that elders from different cultural backgrounds play in family, community, and society.
- 1.4 Identify how policies, regulations, and programs differentially impact older adults and their caregivers, particularly among historically disadvantaged populations (e.g., women and elders of color).
 - a. Know that policies for the guarantee of a basic standard of living, income security and health care coverage in late life are a foundation for quality of life in old age.
 - b. Understand impact of policies in later life that have occurred over the life course such as civil rights, education, immigration and social welfare policies.

II. Core Foundation Practice with Older Adults

The foundation year focuses on the development of *basic skills* in assessment and intervention. All social workers will work with and/or on behalf of older adults, and therefore, require fundamental practice competence in the assessment of older adults.

2.1 Establish rapport and maintain an effective working relationship with older adults and family members.

2.2 Use empathy and sensitive interviewing skills to engage older persons in identifying their strengths and problems.

2.3 Assess social functioning (e.g., social skills, social activity level) and social support of older adults.

2.4 Adapt interviewing methods to potential sensory, language, and cognitive limitations of the older adult.

2.5 Respect and promote older adult clients' right to dignity and self-determination within the context of the law and safety concerns.

2.6 Perform an assessment for service eligibility for older adults' seeking medical health services, mental health services, and community-based services, including their need for assistance with activities of daily living (ADL).

2.7 Be aware of standardized assessment and diagnostic tools that are appropriate for use with older adults (e.g., depression scale, Mini-Mental Status Exam).

2.8 Develop clear, timely, and appropriate service or care plans with measurable objectives for older adults.

2.9 Adapt approaches (e.g., behavioral) and interventions (counseling and psychotherapy) to enhance older persons' coping capacities and mental health.

2.10 Provide social work case management to link elders and their families to resources and services and to conduct long-term planning.

2.11 Assess and assist caregivers in order to reduce their stress levels and maintain their own mental and physical health.

2.12 Utilize group interventions with older adults and their families (e.g., bereavement groups, reminiscence groups).

2.13 Use educational strategies to provide older persons and their families with information related to wellness and disease management (e.g., Alzheimer's disease, end of life care).

2.14 Understand the social work principles of autonomy and self-determination as applied to decision making with or on behalf of older adult clients, with special attention to those who have limited decisional capacity.

2.15 Support individuals and families dealing with end of life issues related to death, dying, bereavement, and loss.

2.16 Understand the perspective and values of social work in relation to working effectively with other disciplines in geriatric interdisciplinary practice with older adults, their caregivers, and the community.

2.17 Understand how to effectively terminate work with older clients and their families.

2.18 Advocate on behalf of older adults with agencies and other professionals to help them obtain quality services.

III. Aging, Human Behavior and the Social Environment

Knowledge of human behavior and developmental theories must be substantially expanded beyond childhood to encompass adulthood and older adulthood in order to prepare for social work practice with persons of all ages. Understanding the aging experience requires relating human growth and the life-course perspective to the interaction of socio-historical context, opportunity structures, cohort differences and adaptive resources.

3.1 Identify major concepts and theories of normal biological, psychological, and social aging including healthy and positive aging.

3.2 Identify stages, process, milestones of adult human growth and development and understand changes in functional capacity and disability associated with health conditions in old age.

3.3 Understand the connection between aging theories (life course, social exchange, political economy, and social capital) and social work perspectives, which have been related to practice with older adults (e.g., person-in environment, social justice, strengths-based perspective).

3.4 Become knowledgeable about losses, changes, and transitions over the life cycle that impact older people and their families.

3.5 Appreciate the influence of culture on roles, stages, and transitions in the life course.

3.6 Understands the unique mental health needs of people in transition between life stages.

3.7 Identify stages in the family life cycle including the late life family and differentiate generational roles and interaction.

3.8 Identify major theories regarding adaptive and maladaptive behaviors across the life-span, including the impact of these behaviors on the health and mental health of older adults.

IV. Aging Social Welfare Policy and Administration

Social work practice with older persons and their families requires knowledge of the policies that shape and regulate the continuum of care and the services available to older adults. Practice in the aging service network must be grounded in knowledge of program development and sound administrative principles.

4.1 Identify organizational policies, procedures and resources of agencies to facilitate or act as barriers in the provision of services to diverse older adult populations and their family caregivers.

4.2 Identify service gaps, fragmentation, discrimination, and barriers that impact service utilization among older persons.

4.3 Incorporate the needs, values, and perspectives of older adults in planning and designing aging programs.

4.4 Adhere to laws and public policies related to older adults (e.g., elder abuse reporting, legal guardianship, powers of attorney, wills, advance directives, and Do-Not-Resuscitate orders).

4.5 Identify and understand major policies and eligibility that provide funding for aging programs and services including the following:

- a. Income maintenance policies: Social Security and Supplemental Security Income
- b. Health care policies: Medicare and Medicaid
- c. Private and Non-Profit Health and Social Services
- d. Older Americans Act Programs including the National Family Caregiver Program

4.6 Identify ways to outreach to older adults and their families to insure appropriate use of the service continuum (e.g., health promotion, mental health, home and community based care, long term care) that includes understanding the diversity of elders' attitudes toward the acceptance of services

4.7 Advocate and organize service providers, community organizations, policy makers, and the public to meet the needs and issues of a growing older population.

- a. Oppose age discrimination in relations to health, housing, employment and transportation

4.8 Use evaluation and research findings to improve practice and program outcomes for older adults.

Advanced (Specialization) Competencies Second Year

v. Advanced Culturally Competent Social Work Practice in Aging

Advanced practice and specialization in aging requires *knowledge* of intra- and inter-group diversity as it relates to aging and late-life outcomes. This cultural competence is applied to effective intervention with older adults and their families, as well as to aging programs and policies.

5.1 Understand and direct the ways one's own values and biases regarding aging impact professional practice and ethical work with older clients, their families, and the provision of aging health and mental health services.

5.2 Integrate into the practice of social work an understanding of the life experiences and unique needs of older adults belonging to specific racial, ethnic, socioeconomic groups; of men and women; and of those with different sexual orientations.

5.3 Incorporate into treatment and service planning the relationship of race, ethnicity, and culture on health status, health belief, help-seeking behaviors, health practice (i.e., traditional medicine), and health outcomes. Include knowledge of:

- a. immigration and its impact on service use;
- b. acculturation /assimilation.

5.4 Intervene in elder mistreatment from a system's perspective and within context of the family, legal, and service delivery system.

5.5 Intervene sensitively and according to professional ethics to assist older adults and families who have diverse cultural, spiritual, and ethnic values and beliefs, including:

- a. different cultural perspectives, functional roles and contributions the elderly generation make in society;
- b. the areas of death & dying, hospice and palliative care, help-seeking, caregiving & family responsibility, physical & mental illness, and cognitive impairment; and
- c. work with translators and understand language/terminology unique or specific to diverse linguistic groups

5.6 Develop strategies to change policies, regulations, and programs to improve the well-being of older adults and their caregivers, particularly historically underserved groups.

VI. Advanced Practice with Older Adults

Specialization involves applied knowledge of *complex situations* and skills to making differential diagnosis and intervention with and on behalf of older adults. It involves an advanced level of professional and ethical practice in complex and challenging circumstances.

6.1 Engage, maintain rapport, and sustain effective working relationships with a wide range of older adults (including those with behavior problems, mental illness and dementia) and their family and caregivers.

6.2 Conduct a comprehensive geriatric assessment of psychosocial factors that affect older persons' physical and mental well-being.

6.3 Identify ways to ascertain the health status and physical functioning (e.g., ADLs and IADLs) of the older adult in order to provide assistance.

6.4 Conduct differential mental health diagnosis regarding dementia, delirium, depression with the interdisciplinary team and using diagnostic tools that are appropriate for use with older adults (e.g., depression scale, Mini-Mental Status Exam).

6.5 Design and implement service plans to help older people and their families manage/improve functioning with cognitive loss or mental health problems (e.g., depression, dementia, and delirium), health issues, and/or physical functioning.

6.6 Develop and implement service plans to assist older adults with health issues and difficulties in physical functioning.

6.7 Apply social work ethical principles to *decisions* on behalf of all older adult clients with special attention to those who have limited decisional capacity including:

- a. complex situations in which self-determination and dignity are challenged or inconsistent with safety and legal concerns;
- b. reporting and intervening with elder mistreatment such as neglect and abuse; and
- c. reporting and intervening with those in danger to self or others.

6.8 Develop and institutionalize educational interventions to enhance older persons' coping capacities and mental health.

6.9 Conduct assessment and intervention strategies for substance/drug/alcohol abuse in later life.

6.10 Educate families and others to improve communication with older people in light of sensory, speech, and cognitive limitations of older adults.

6.11 Provide comprehensive geriatric social work case management to link elders and their families to resources and services to assist them with multi-faceted problems and provide long-term care planning.

6.12 Intervene to assist individuals and families dealing with complex end of life issues regarding death, dying, bereavement, and loss.

6.13 Demonstrate collaboration skills and leadership with other disciplines in geriatric interdisciplinary practice with older adults, their caregivers, and in a variety of service setting including public social services, adult protection, advocates, rehabilitation services, Adult Day Health Care, and Hospice/Palliative Care.

6.14 Utilize family interventions with older adults and their families (e.g., promote safety, restore relationships) in order to assist caregivers to reduce their stress levels, maintain their own mental and physical health and promote better care of the elder.

6.15 Mediate situations with problem behaviors including angry or hostile older adults and/or family members.

6.16 Reevaluate and adjust service or care plans for older adults on a continuing basis.

6.17 Promote the well-being of older adults by actively campaigning for better services and policies.

6.18 Evaluate and conduct research into the effectiveness of practice and programs in achieving intended outcomes for older adults.

VII. Advanced Perspectives on Aging, Human Behavior and the Social Environment

Theories of human behavior and development relevant to social work practice require application to assessment, planning and interventions with older adults at the advanced level.

7.1 Apply concepts, theories, and research of biological, psychological, and social aging to social work assessment and intervention.

7.2 Understand the effects and interactions of multiple chronic conditions, medication, nutrition, and sudden or on-going causes of changes in cognitive states and functional capacity.

7.3 Relate social work perspectives and theories to practice with older adults (e.g., person-in environment, social justice, strengths-based perspective).

7.4 Design and conduct interventions related to losses, changes and transitions over the life cycle with particular attention to:

- a. the process of grief
- b. differentiation of grief from clinical symptoms of depression;
- c. management of chronic illness and social functioning;
- d. knowing the impact of change of residence.

7.5 Develop intervention based on the stages in the late life-family and intergenerational roles and interaction.

- a. Integrate understanding of caretaker's behavior (current and historical) that leads to engagement, withdrawal, disempowerment or empowerment of elderly relative.
- b. Support the multiple types of grandparent roles.
- c. Build interventions around cultural strengths and challenges in the intergenerational family.
- d. Recognize and support the diversity of family including same sex families, step-families, grandparent-headed families and other family types.

VIII. Advanced Aging Social Welfare Policy and Administration

Application of knowledge of policies to planning programs and changing institutions for the benefit of older adults and their families is part of advanced practice and specialization.

8.1 Assure appropriate access, utilization, continuity, coordination, and monitoring of the continuum of public resources for older persons including community-based care, residential care, nursing home, and health/mental health services.

8.2 Assess and address impacts of social and health care policies on practice with historically disadvantaged populations.

8.3 Develop program budgets that take into account diverse sources of financial support for older adult services.

8.4 Develop strategies to address service gaps, fragmentation, discrimination, and barriers that impact older persons, including intergenerational approaches.

8.5 Develop strategies to improve laws and public policies related to older adults and to encourage compliance with them, including elder abuse reporting, legal guardianship, durable powers of attorney, wills, advance directives, and Do-Not-Resuscitate orders.

8.6 Collaborate with service providers, community organizations, policy makers, and the public to address and advocate for the needs and issues of a growing aging population.

8.7 Engage older adults actively in planning and designing programs.

8.8 Adapt organizational policies, procedures, and resources to facilitate the provision of services to diverse older adults and their family caregivers.

- a. Contribute to the development of policies covering work site inspections and safety regulations that would apply to special needs of elderly such as special provisions made for the handicapped.
- b. Advocate for the development of new roles and new options in work settings for elders, such as, specialist, consultant, part time work, and flexibility in hours.

8.9 Evaluate and participate in continuous quality improvement to ensure the effectiveness of programs in achieving intended outcomes for older adults.

Reference

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