

CSWE Department of Social Work Accreditation Response to COVID-19 FAQs & Field Guidance

March 18, 2021

This info sheet addresses the most frequently asked questions regarding accreditation standards, compliance requirements, and alternative options for fulfilling field education hours.

This document is updated periodically by COA and DOSWA, and when updates and/or changes occur, the program's primary contact will be notified and the document will be posted publicly on the CSWE website, and recent changes will be highlighted.

In addition, please review:

- [COA's October 16, 2020 statement](#)
- [COA's June 18, 2020 response to NADD](#)
- [COA's May 9, 2020 statement](#)
- [COA's March 25, 2020 statement](#)

This is a rapidly evolving situation; for the latest information, frequently visit the following pages:

- [Accreditation-specific COVID-19 Info](#)
- [CSWE COVID-19 Response](#)

Note: This info sheet is continuously updated and dated.

Commission on Accreditation Statement of Trust & Support

CSWE's Department of Social Work Accreditation (DOSWA) and the Commission on Accreditation (COA) recognize that this is a stressful time for all stakeholders in higher education. CSWE's priority is the health and safety of its program members, volunteers, social work faculty members, staff members, students, and field personnel, and the clients, constituents, and communities they serve daily across the nation. The COA takes the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the educational process seriously. CSWE and the COA trust that programs will do, professionally and ethically, what is best for them and their students as they develop contingency/continuity plans. We reiterate our support and respect for the autonomy and diligence of programs to provide accommodations and flexibility for their students in extenuating circumstances. Staff members are available to assist programs as situations arise. Please contact your program's accreditation specialist, preferably via e-mail, with questions not addressed by this evolving info sheet.

The COA is monitoring, addressing, and responding to the ever-shifting educational landscape as affected by COVID-19. As information emerges, CSWE will continue to distribute up-to-date information to programs and members.

Program Compliance During COVID-19 Pandemic

Programs are expected to maintain compliance with all standards during and in-between review cycles. The COA has provided a number of flexible options, especially related to field education and program delivery method, and expiration dates for these flexibilities. All other standards must be upheld in order to protect students, faculty, staff, clients and constituents, and the public as well as the quality of the education environment in which we prepare competent social workers.

CSWE Coronavirus (COVID-19) Response Q&A Webinar

DOSWA hosted a CSWE Coronavirus (COVID-19) Response Q&A webinar on Thursday, March 19, 2020, at 2:00 pm ET to allow programs to ask additional questions regarding accreditation standards, compliance requirements, and alternative options for fulfilling field education hours. Due to technical difficulties, the recorded webinar was lost. However, questions posed during the webinar are captured in this info sheet. As additional questions are posed, future webinars may be scheduled in response.

Ways for Programs to Share Ideas

- **Crowdsourcing:** To better understand how social work programs and their institutions are responding to COVID-19, CSWE conducted a pulse survey on March 12, 2020. Based on the results, the accreditation team compiled an online crowdsourced list of virtual/remote field education tasks/activities, [located here](#). The list provides all programs access to ideas from survey responses and allows programs to continue sharing ideas and forming solutions together. This resource is free and available for all program stakeholders to contribute to and may be used by faculty members, field directors, field instructors, students, and so forth. Please note that all examples will not be vetted in detail by the COA or CSWE staff. Additionally, we cannot guarantee that all ideas shared in the document will be free of charge. With your contributions, the list will be a growing depository of options for addressing field education virtually.
- [CSWE Spark community discussion board “Responding to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)”](#); account creation and sign-in required
- CSWE Council on Field Education electronic mailing list; e-mail kchapman@cswe.org to be added to this list
- [National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work electronic mailing list \(for members only\)](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

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Field Education

My program wants to ensure compliance with the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS); which accreditation standards are most affected by this crisis?

Four accreditation standards in the [2015 EPAS](#) and [Interpretation Guide](#) inform this response:

1. **Accreditation Standard (AS) 2.2.4:** Current COA interpretation allows “in-person” contact to be accomplished through digital technologies. There is neither a minimum requirement regarding direct client contact hours nor a maximum regarding virtual contact hours. During the COVID-19 pandemic, at program discretion, remote field activity, field supervision field seminar hours, and simulations, may be counted toward the accrual of field hours through May 31, 2022. Such activities should be based upon enhancing student social work competence in real or simulated practice settings. Simulated practice situations are defined in the [2015 EPAS Glossary \(p. 22\)](#).
2. **AS 2.2.5:** The required minimums are 400 hours of field education for baccalaureate programs and 900 hours for master’s programs. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, students who have completed 85% of the required placement hours (i.e., 340 hours for baccalaureate programs and 765 hours for master’s programs) to a satisfactory level may, at program discretion, be evaluated as having met the field placement requirements.
This reduction in field hours may be applied to all field placement courses until May 31, 2022. Field placement courses that started prior to May 31, 2022 but will not end until after that date will also be eligible for the 15% reduction.
For students in programs that offer the reduction in field hours, even though students will be completing a reduced number of field hours during this time, they will be granted the full number of hours for accreditation and graduation purposes. Programs cannot waive more than 15% of field hours as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. New field placement courses that begin after May 31, 2022, will return to the full number of hours required by AS 2.2.5.

At the program’s discretion, the field hours reduction option applies to all social work students in accredited programs, whether BSW, MSW, advanced standing, part-time, full-time, in block field placements, in concurrent field placements, attending brick-and-mortar programs, online programs, summer placements, etc.

As always, if an MSW student has a BSW degree from a CSWE-accredited program (typically an advanced standing student), the 400 hours the student completed for the BSW degree can count toward the 900 hours (now 765 hours until May 31, 2022) required for an

MSW program. Thus, an advanced standing MSW student may complete a minimum of 365 hours under the field hour reduction option.

3. **AS 2.2.7:** It is required that programs have policies, procedures, and criteria in place for supporting student safety in field placements.
4. **AS B/M 2.2.9:** For cases in which a credentialed field instructor is unavailable or unable to continue student supervision due to the field placement site closing, the program assumes responsibility for reinforcing a social work perspective directly with the student. For example, field seminar instructors may add additional supervision time to the end of the seminar class for students who do not have access to the credentialed field instructor.

Does CSWE have any suggestions regarding how students can meet field hours?

Yes! Field education programs must ensure that demonstration of social work competencies is through in-person contact, which refers to interpersonal interactions with clients and constituencies, and may include the use of digital technologies (AS 2.2.4, [2015 EPAS Interpretation Guide](#)). The EPAS allows for technology-based social work practice (e.g., telehealth, telework, phone contact with colleagues, clients, and constituents, online trainings, remote access to platforms and projects). Client-related virtual meetings should be in accordance with field site policies for secure communications.

Field agencies may work with students to allow/support telework. For example, perhaps students can complete client case/paperwork on a secure server, call in for meetings, work on projects from home, engage in professional development activities, and meet virtually with their field instructors. Of course, these ideas may not replace all field hours that may be missed due to a crisis, but they can help close the gap. Such telework solutions can be temporary until the program convenes to develop longer-term solutions.

Components of student field education can be temporarily facilitated via technology. Some programs have had students work on crisis response policies, procedures, notifications, and education (e.g., handouts, PowerPoints, webinars, public service announcements, and e-mail blasts) based on the crisis or natural/manmade disaster.

- For example, a field education program in Puerto Rico developed a list of crisis response tasks students could accomplish specific to their agency regarding the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. This included having a student at a mental health agency create fliers with information about local services for basic needs and support groups that offered to help with healing after traumatic experiences.
- In another example, students worked with local religious congregations to organize bottled water collection and distribution during the Flint, MI, water crisis.
- In the case of a public health issue, students might engage activities such as these:
 - Help with public education about staying healthy
 - Connect clients to Medicaid/Medicare or other affordable health-care plans
 - Propose revisions to agency policies and procedures about safety
 - Contact clients to inform them of any changes to regularly scheduled services
 - Create lists of referrals to other community resources for their clients
 - Work on projects or plans for future events or initiatives
 - Engage in virtual professional development to support the students' work at the placement (e.g., webinars, DSM review, informational interviews with partner organizations)
 - Develop awareness posts to be used on the placement's social media accounts

- Write advocacy communications to elected officials about issues and legislation the agency is connected to or populations it serves
- Craft awareness efforts via placement's social media accounts

The DOSWA team compiled an online crowdsourced list of virtual/remote field education tasks/activities [located here](#).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, at program discretion, remote field activity, field supervision field seminar hours, and simulations, may be counted toward the accrual of field hours through May 31, 2022. Such activities should be based upon enhancing student social work competence in real or simulated practice settings.

The program may consider implementing a mechanism for students to track/log field hours completed. Although such field hour logs are not required by the EPAS, it may prove a helpful tool in ensuring students complete the requisite field hours throughout their studies.

What are programs to do when the institution or field agencies are closed?

In the case of a closed field agency, it is within the program's purview and policies to reinforce the social work perspective, per AS B/M 2.2.9, and provide a plan for students to complete field hours consistent with the EPAS. Programs should make every effort to place students at a field setting. However, students do not need to be connected to a field setting, should extenuating circumstances prohibit placement. Field students, whether connected to a field setting or not, should have opportunities for in-person contact with clients and constituencies (which may be facilitated via technology) (AS 2.2.4). Should an institution close, programs should contact their accreditation specialists. Waiving more than 15% of field hours due to placement, program, or institution closures during COVID-19 is not permitted.

Can social work employment hours count toward field practice hours?

Yes, it is already acceptable in the current COA interpretation of the standards for student learners to have their place of employment serve as their field placement setting provided that programs can ensure that the employment-based setting provides opportunities for the student to engage as a learner and fulfill field education requirements. Programs must also ensure field education supervision of students either through a separate qualified supervisor or by the program assuming responsibility for reinforcing a social work perspective directly with the student. In extenuating circumstances, students may have the same field instructor as employment supervisor with different supervision times.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, through May 31, 2022, field hours gained in a student's place of employment may be counted toward required field hours. Temporarily, student field assignments and employment tasks may be the same and counted toward required field hours if the tasks have clear links to the nine social work competencies and their related behaviors as well as any competencies added by the program.

Does CSWE have a limit on the number of virtual in-person contact hours students can count toward their field hours?

No, it is within the program's purview to determine a limit (if any) on virtual in-person contact hours. The 2015 EPAS does not limit the number of virtual hours a student may count toward required field hours.

Can students count participation in remote learning and simulated practice situations toward field hours?

The COA supports program discretion in selecting remote platforms and simulations that can be used to meet field education hours. Simulated practice situations are defined in the [2015 EPAS Glossary \(p. 22\)](#). Given the changing and dynamic landscape of remote practice, COA supports simulation and other innovations that will provide remote learning opportunities that enable students to meet field education requirements.

If programs can show that they are helping students learn and demonstrate the competencies, the COA will be flexible in its acceptance of the platforms used.

The program may consider a few extra touchpoints throughout the curriculum for simulating working with clients and constituents' groups to support student preparedness in these unprecedented times.

Do field seminar hours count toward accruing required field hours?

Yes, field seminar classroom hours, synchronous or asynchronous, may count toward field hours. Programs have the discretion to identify where, when, and how field-based seminars and field simulations are to be counted toward field hours. The COA supports program discretion in determining the curricular location of field seminar and field simulation content.

In some instances, field seminars are distinct and separate classes. In other instances, field seminar activity may be included in portions of practice courses. If programs can show that field seminar activities are designated as field education in helping students demonstrate the competencies, the COA will be flexible in its acceptance of a wide range of field seminar activities. This interpretation is retroactively effective. Programs may count field seminar hours students completed during previous semesters.

What are alternative ways students can continue supervision, and does this count toward field hours?

Yes, supervision can be counted toward field hours. There are no requirements regarding frequency (weekly, biweekly, monthly, etc.), modality (in-person, videoconferencing, telephone, additional time added to the end of field seminar, etc.), or individual versus group structure for field supervision by a qualified field instructor or through reinforcement by the program (AS B/M 2.2.9). If field instructors are unavailable or unable to continue supervising students, it is within the program's purview and policies to reinforce the social work perspective, per AS B/M 2.2.9. For example, field seminar instructors may add additional supervision time to the end of the seminar class for students who do not have access to the credentialed field instructor.

Can my program's additional field hour requirements be reduced/eliminated?

Yes, if the program requires additional hours beyond the minimum per AS 2.2.5, the program may choose to reduce or eliminate these additional hours.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, through May 31, 2022, at program discretion, program's may offer a 15% reduction in required field education hours (i.e., 340 hours for baccalaureate programs and 765 hours for master's programs).

Can our program's supplemental field experience hours be counted toward the minimum hour requirement?

Yes, for baccalaureate and master's programs, if your program offers a supplemental field experience (e.g., junior field, experiential learning, exploratory, pre-field hours) that complies with all the standards under AS 2.2, the supplemental field experience hours may be counted toward the minimum hours required per AS 2.2.5.

Can baccalaureate social work field hours be counted for master's social work students?

Yes, for master's programs offering advanced standing status, the program must ensure that advanced standing students complete a total of 900 field education hours between their accredited baccalaureate and master's social work programs. For example, with the reduction of hours, a BSW student who completed 450 field hours would need to complete only 315 hours as an MSW student for a total of 765 hours, if the program permits (AS 2.2.5, [2015 EPAS Interpretation Guide](#)).

For master's programs with students who have earned a BSW but are not enrolled as advanced standing students, the program is permitted to allow BSW field hours to count toward the MSW field hours, with a few guidelines. Per AS 3.1.4, the program is permitted to count BSW hours if the credits are from other CSWE-accredited or candidate social work programs. If the program accepts field education hours from programs that are not accredited by CSWE, the program must explain how the program assesses course equivalency to comply with all AS 2.2 (field education) standards and AS 3.2.2 (practice course instructor qualifications).

Additionally, per AS M3.1.1, baccalaureate social work graduates admitted to master's social work programs are not to repeat what has been achieved in their baccalaureate social work programs. Therefore, the program must have a process/mechanism to determine whether the student's field education hours earned during a BSW program may be applied to the total 900 field hours required for the MSW program (AS 3.1.4 and AS 3.1.1, [2015 EPAS Interpretation Guide](#)).

Does CSWE require a certain number of field hours per each systems level (individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities)?

No, it is within the program's purview to determine the systems levels students have in-person contact with (including via digital technologies) to complete the required field hours, as well as the number of hours per each systems level (if any). The EPAS does not require a specified number of field hours per each systems level. For example, a master's program with a clinical area of specialized practice is permitted to allow students to count in-person contact hours with communities and organizations, if the program permits. In another example, students completing their generalist practice field placement should have opportunities to practice with all five systems levels.

Will the master's program I apply for (including advanced standing) accept my reduced field hours?

The COA and DOSWA encourage master's programs to accept reduced hours for students who are eligible for this reduction within the field completion deadline of May 31, 2022. The COA supports flexibility during these extenuating circumstances; however, it is ultimately within the program's discretion to determine their admission criteria (AS M3.1.1) and policies and procedures for awarding advanced standing (AS M3.1.3).

Reaffirmation & Candidacy Accreditation Documents

My program's candidacy/reaffirmation accreditation document is due soon. Are extensions available to programs?

Yes, options for extensions are available to programs that have materials due to CSWE between April 1, 2020 and April 1, 2022 but are unable to complete accreditation work in a timely manner due to their institutions' response to COVID-19. [Complete the required form](#), which is located on the [Accreditation Processes page](#) under the "Postponement of Reaffirmation Review" tab. Submit the completed form, which includes a brief description of your program's situation, to your program's accreditation specialist via e-mail. Type "COVID-19: Extension Request" in the subject line.

For all other due dates, please contact your program's accreditation specialist to discuss your request.

How does my program's continuity/contingency plan and any other temporary changes to how the program complies with the EPAS affect writing an accreditation document?

Programs submitting candidacy benchmarks and reaffirmation self-studies between April 1, 2020 and April 1, 2022 must include an introductory page, not exceeding one page, explaining how their program has temporarily changed and adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this introduction is to briefly explain to the COA what broad changes have been made to the program during this unprecedented time (field education, online instruction, etc.). The content of the accreditation document itself must reflect the program's typical operations prior to the pandemic.

Programs submitting progress reports, restoration reports, and deferral documents between April 1, 2020 and April 1, 2022 need to include an introductory page only if the standards within the report have been temporarily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. If the standards in the report were not affected, please explicitly state that the program's compliance has not been affected in those areas.

This introductory page is to reflect temporary changes only. Programs that have made plan to make permanent changes must follow the existing Substantive Change [Policy, Section 1.2.4](#) in the [EPAS Handbook](#).

Please note that the Integrity Policy (Section 1.1.15 in the [EPAS Handbook](#)) states that programs shall demonstrate honesty and integrity. Accredited and candidate programs must evidence full and candid disclosure and make readily available all information necessary for the COA to determine compliance.

Pass/Fail Grading

Our program is temporarily altering our grading system from letter grades to pass/fail. Does this affect compliance with the EPAS?

No, it is within the purview of the program to design, implement, and execute the grading system of its choosing. However, the program may consider how pass/fail or credit/no credit grading may affect a student's ability to meet master's or doctoral-level program admission criteria.

Contingency/Continuity Planning

How does my program decide its continuity/contingency plan?

Programs should decide how best to meet field education requirements in a manner that is appropriate for their students, communities, and unique challenges. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of social work programs in conjunction with their host institutions to make decisions and accommodations considering risk management, safety, and the quality educational experience of students, including field placements (AS 2.2.7). Programs are encouraged to work with their host institutions to provide a consistent approach for students across all programs within an institution. Legal counsel, health-care providers, or other educational programs, such as schools of nursing or education, may provide input on consistent safety policies. We also encourage programs to consult their state-based [social work licensing boards](#), state higher education authorities, and regional accreditors regarding minimum educational requirements and any necessary notification of program changes or contingency/continuity plans.

Does my program need to notify CSWE of its continuity/contingency plan?

No, currently, neither the COA nor DOSWA is requesting formal notification of temporary changes to program delivery method due to the pandemic. Per Policy [1.2.4](#) (Section A) in the [EPAS Handbook](#), revisions to curriculum content such as required social work courses (including practice and field courses) are not required to be reported to the COA or DOSWA.

Neither the COA nor DOSWA staff members approve contingency/continuity plans.

Making Permanent Changes to Delivery Method / Offering an Online Program Option

Can our program temporarily offer hybrid or fully online curricula?

Yes, without impacting accreditation status, programs may elect to temporarily offer fully online, hybrid, etc. curricula during the COVID-19 pandemic without obtaining approval from CSWE's COA. Please do not submit contingency/continuity plans to accreditation staff. Programs may not advertise as online programs during this time that they are offering temporary online curricula.

Can our program permanently offer an online program option without approval?

No, permanently offering a new online program option requires reporting and approval per the Substantive Change process detailed in Section [1.2.4](#) in the [EPAS Handbook](#). The policy does not prohibit a program from advertising and recruiting students for a new program option; however, programs are required to secure COA approval prior to their implementation date (when classes are first offered for the new program option).

The accreditation status obtained at initial accreditation or reaffirmation only covers the components that were reviewed in the benchmarks or self-study at the time of the COA review. Failure to submit a Substantive Change Proposal in advance of the implementation date may adversely impact the program's accreditation status.

Assessment

Due to COVID-19 disruptions to the academic schedule, some assessment data cannot be collected. How does missing assessment data affect our compliance?

Programs are encouraged to continue following their assessment plans to the extent possible. The COA recognizes that assessment outcomes may be negatively affected by disruptions to classroom and field instruction. Programs reporting assessment outcomes between April 1, 2020 and April 1, 2022, as part of candidacy or reaffirmation self-studies, are encouraged to provide context relative to the impact of COVID-19. Programs may also address the impact of COVID-19 in implications for program renewal (AS 4.0.4) and program changes in explicit (AS 4.0.4) and implicit (AS 4.0.5) curriculum assessment plans.

Per AS 4.0.3, programs are required to post Form AS 4 B/M publicly at least every two years. Thus, programs who posted data in 2019 do not need to post updated data until 2021. Please note that Form AS 4 B/M was updated in Spring 2020. **These forms are required to be included in reaffirmation and candidacy documents beginning August 1, 2021 and posted on all program websites by July 1, 2021.**

Virtual Reaffirmation and Candidacy Site Visits

My program has an upcoming reaffirmation or candidacy site visit. How is the site visit affected?

Reaffirmation and candidacy site visits will be conducted through virtual meetings, instead of on-site meetings, through **February 28, 2022**. See guidelines for virtual site visits [here](#). The virtual site visit directive may be extended as the COVID-19 situation warrants.

Student Safety & Concerns

As a student, I am concerned about my education, graduation date, financial aid, and prospective employment. Who can I speak to about how COVID-19 closures are affecting my education?

Educational institutions and their social work programs are working to devise contingency/continuity plans that best respond to the health and safety of program faculty members, staff members, students, field personnel, and the clients, constituents, and communities they serve. Plans should consider varying guidance and regulations from federal, state, and local lawmakers; licensing boards; and regional accreditors and state-based higher education authorities.

As the accrediting body for social work programs, CSWE's COA is working diligently to publish FAQs and clear guidance, especially about students in field education. Ultimately, how the program incorporates the information provided by CSWE into their contingency/continuity plans is within the program's purview. Programs are encouraged to be mindful of potential consequences for students in terms of finances, degree completion, quality educational experience, accreditation, licensure, and/or credentialing, and future employment.

Students are encouraged to provide feedback and share concerns directly with the program and/or institutional leadership teams regarding a program's contingency/continuity plan and field education hours.

As a student, am I eligible for the reduced number of field hours?

The reduced number of field education hour is an option that the COA has extended to accredited baccalaureate and master’s social work programs. Programs are not required to accept this option. Students may speak directly with their social work programs to determine if they are eligible for the reduced number of field hours.

What guidance should be provided to students regarding safety?

Whether social work students are practicing on site or virtually, it is vital to continue promoting good health and hygiene practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory diseases. The following practices are recommended:

- Stay home if you are sick and advise others to do the same.
- Always cover coughs or sneezes with a tissue or the crook of your elbow.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol if soap and warm water are not available.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces (computers, keyboards, desks, etc.).

The [CDC has provided guidance for preventing the spread of COVID-19](#) in communities, educational settings, and workplaces.

Programs and students can visit CSWE’s COVID-19 response page [CSWE’s COVID-19 response page](#) to find links to federal health agencies.

- [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#)
- [National Association of Social Workers \(NASW\)](#)
- [National Institutes of Health](#)
- [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services](#)

Thank you for your patience during this difficult time when the accreditation team is dealing with an unprecedented situation. CSWE is doing its very best to be proactive and responsive. We look forward to continuing to share ideas, resources, and best practices in managing field education and providing support to programs as our nation and the world address the spread of COVID-19. If your program has contacted a DOSWA team member, we request your patience and understanding as you await our response while we are experiencing a very high volume of communications.

Accreditation Team