



## **Social Work: A Vital Workforce to Address the Opioid Crisis**

*“Almost every front-line social worker will engage with a client struggling with substance use disorder or a family with a loved one struggling over the course of their career... They must be equipped with the best clinical tools to help clients navigate a path to treatment and recovery.” Marylou Sudders, Massachusetts Secretary of Health and Human Services*

As one of the largest providers of professional substance use and mental health services in the United States, social workers are in a unique position to touch the lives of millions of Americans battling addiction across the full treatment continuum, including prevention, early diagnosis, intervention, and sustained recovery. Social workers operate from a holistic perspective, vital to helping individuals, families, and communities fighting addiction. They provide services in community settings; schools; clinics; hospitals; child welfare agencies; and local, state, and federal agencies. If not directly providing substance and mental health treatment, social workers ensure that individuals, families, and communities are linked with these services, and furthermore, address critical gaps in the continuum of care. This is necessary to ensure adequate recovery and minimize relapse among individuals with opioid use disorder (OUD), as well as other substance use and coexisting disorders. In addition, social workers are prepared to address social factors that impact treatment and recovery, such as housing, education, and job security. These needs are often missed in settings that do not involve social work.

**As policy-makers consider policies to tackle the opioid epidemic and addiction, CSWE supports the following principles:**

- ***Federal policy to address the opioid epidemic must include Social Work as a vital part of the health-care team, to ensure that individuals, families, and communities battling addiction are fully supported.*** Federal policies must reflect the vital role of social workers in helping bridge gaps in care which individuals and families fighting substance use disorders often encounter. Social workers are key to ensuring individuals transitioning from treatment to recovery do not fall through the cracks, especially when they are in their most vulnerable state, by providing seamless coordination on care teams.
- ***Interprofessional team-based care models to help combat the opioid epidemic, which are inclusive of social work.*** Given the multi-faceted nature of the opioid crisis, an “all hands-on deck” approach is essential to eradicate this devastating epidemic. Federal policy should continue to support interdisciplinary team-based care models, inclusive of the social work profession, to meet the needs of individuals suffering from OUD and other substance use disorders.
- ***Federal policies should support federal education and training programs to ensure an adequate pipeline of substance use providers.*** Robust investments are needed to maintain a strong behavioral health-care workforce to meet the challenges facing the U.S. including addiction. CSWE commends Congress for making investments in mental and behavioral health workforce programs at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). CSWE encourages continuous efforts to support the pipeline for professionals to meet opioid and addiction needs, including support for social work. To

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help meet the growing challenges of the opioid epidemic, federal policy should reflect the importance of health profession education and training programs, including existing programs inclusive of social work at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), as well as new programs.

- ***Federal policy to address opioids and addiction should address social determinants of health.*** Social determinants of health are important variables in understanding best practices for combatting the opioid epidemic. Policy-makers should acknowledge the vital need to address social determinants of health to improve individual outcomes, as well as improve the health of communities across the United States.
- ***Federal policy should support integrated health-care where appropriate.*** Evidence illustrates that individuals do better when they receive treatment and services for mental health and substance use disorders in one place. Where appropriate, federal policy should encourage this type of integration.
- ***Federal policy should strive to meet the full needs of the individual.*** Meeting the full needs of individuals suffering from addiction is vital. This includes prevention, diagnosis, access to care, medication management, treatment, therapy, and support services that are culturally relevant to the individual. Such a holistic approach supersedes a pure medical course of treatment. CSWE believes that addressing the full needs of the individual is critical to recovery.
- ***Support efforts to identify and apply evidence-based practices by health professions to ensure proper care for individuals, families, and communities suffering from addiction.*** CSWE supports efforts to identify, apply, and advance evidence-based “best practices,” such as activities conducted through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA’s) State Targeted Response Technical Assistance program.

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