

# Social Work Education Core Principles for the Prevention and Management of Substance Misuse

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RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE GOVERNOR'S SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION WORKING GROUP ON SUBSTANCE MISUSE



Governor's Social Work Education  
Working Group on Substance Misuse

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## **CORE PRINCIPLES FOR THE PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF SUBSTANCE MISUSE**

### **Working Group Background:**

In an effort to prepare the next generation of social workers with the necessary tools to curb the nation's current opioid epidemic, the Baker-Polito Administration, the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, and the deans and program directors of the Commonwealth's nine graduate schools of social work have partnered to enhance current social work education. This first-in-the-nation partnership has resulted in the establishment of cross-institutional core principles for the prevention and management of substance misuse that will reach the more than 4,300 enrolled social work students across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Social workers are on the front lines when it comes to supporting individuals, from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in their environments. The struggle with the unhealthy use of and addictions to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, gambling, and other process addictions, is one that many social workers' clients experience, either personally or with their loved ones. As services to support people struggling with addictions expand, both within the traditional treatment system and throughout human service systems via service integration, there is an increased need for well-prepared clinicians, case managers, supervisors, and the many other roles that social workers play.

The NASW Code of Ethics obligates social workers to ensure that their clients receive the services they need in an appropriate and timely fashion. This obligation, along with changes in the health care system which require close integration of behavioral and physical health care services, necessitates a clear set of principles (in concert with the core competencies developed and adopted by all medical schools, dental schools, advanced practice nursing programs, and physician assistant programs in the Commonwealth) to frame the topic of substance use and addictions education for social work students.

This collaboration and set of cross-institutional core principles will serve as a vital bridge between social work education and practice by providing social work students with enhanced training in

primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention strategies regarding substance misuse, representing an innovative and forward-thinking contribution to a multi-faceted strategy to curb the opioid epidemic. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is again setting a new standard – this time by providing future generations of social workers with a strong foundation in preventing substance misuse, identifying substance use disorders, and referring individuals to appropriate treatment and recovery support services through high-quality, person-centered, and inter-professional practice. With this enhanced educational foundation, Massachusetts’ social work students will be better prepared to provide excellent person-centered care as our future social workers.

## **Core Principles Overview:**

The Governor's Working Group is pleased to outline the following cross-institutional consensus document regarding a set of measureable core principles for the prevention and management of substance misuse. Working Group members, representing the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, the Department of Public Health, the Department of Mental Health, the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, and the deans and program directors of the Commonwealth's nine social work schools convened and advanced recommendations.

The following recommendations for the core principle domains will be adopted by all Massachusetts social work schools for integration into the education and training of all Massachusetts social work students. Each school will establish appropriate curricular interventions and innovations to ensure that the stated principles are being addressed for all students by the time they graduate, allowing schools to tailor these principles to their own curriculum development.

To this end, the schools have agreed to develop and implement an assessment of these principles in order to evaluate students for baseline and post-implementation measurements. The Working Group recognizes opportunities to link these skills to emerging trends in social work education and performance-based evaluation as a key component of curricula, utilizing simulated settings and/or encounter-based assessments using standardized cases. These assessments represent the gold standard for objective skill evaluation.

**Preamble:**

The following cross-institutional core principles are framed from the perspective of an encounter with an individual suffering from, or at risk for, a substance use disorder. The goal of the stated core principles is to support future social workers, over the course of their education, with both skills and a foundational knowledge in substance misuse prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery supports. These principles set clear baseline standards for primary (preventing substance misuse), secondary (caring for individuals at-risk for substance use disorders), and tertiary (managing substance use disorders as a chronic disease) prevention skills and knowledge in the areas of screening, evaluation, and supportive recovery. This document enlists skills and knowledge which should be broadly applied to enhance the ability of future social workers to prevent and manage substance misuse, and to support individuals and their families seeking recovery from addictions.

These core principles are designed to serve as a vital bridge between social work education and practice, thus ensuring that future generations of social workers are equipped with essential skills for high-quality, person-centered, inter-professional practice. These concepts both encourage and demand a social worker's understanding of the importance of both team- and system-based care provision, ensuring the holistic treatment of substance use disorders as a chronic disease. The Massachusetts schools of social work universally recognize these core principles as integral to the abilities of all social workers to safely and competently prevent, identify, treat or refer to treatment, and support recovery from substance use disorders.

## **CORE PRINCIPLES FOR THE PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF SUBSTANCE MISUSE**

In the appropriate setting, using recommended and evidence-based methodologies, with a clear understanding of the cultural contexts of the individuals they serve, the graduating social work student should demonstrate the independent ability and/or knowledge to:

### **□ Primary Prevention Domain – Preventing Substance Misuse: *Screening, Evaluation, and Prevention***

- 1. Demonstrate an understanding of evidence-based prevention techniques and strategies,** including community assessment, the use of data to inform prevention efforts, a focus on risk and protective factors for substance misuse, and other approaches consistent with the Strategic Prevention Framework and other evidence-based strategies.
- 2. Assess a person’s risk for substance use disorders** by utilizing age-, gender-, and culturally and linguistically-appropriate communication, screening, and assessment methodologies, supplemented with relevant available information, including (but not limited to) family history, co-occurring mental health disorders (especially depression, anxiety disorders, and PTSD), and environmental indicators.
- 3. Demonstrate an awareness of how to inform individuals** about the risks associated with substance misuse and the neurobiology of addiction, and to coach them about available resources, such as pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic treatment options, including opioid and non-opioid pharmacologic treatments for acute and chronic pain management.

### **□ Secondary Prevention Domain – Caring for Individuals At-Risk for Substance Use Disorders: *Engaging Individuals in Safe, Informed, and Person-Centered Care***

- 4. Demonstrate an understanding of the substance use disorder treatment and recovery supports system, and how to appropriately refer individuals** to their primary care physician, substance use intervention and treatment services, mental health specialists, community-based supports, and/or pain specialists for consultation and collaboration.
- 5. Demonstrate the ability to complete a multi-dimensional contextual assessment** inclusive of substance use and its interaction with symptoms of mental illness, which informs treatment and recovery support recommendations across the continuum of care.
- 6. Articulate the foundational skills in person-centered counseling and behavior change,** consistent with evidence-based techniques, including motivational interviewing, harm reduction, relapse prevention, and brief intervention skills.

### **□ Tertiary Prevention Domain - Managing Substance Use Disorders as a Chronic Disease: *Eliminate Stigma and Build Awareness of Social Determinants***

- 7. Recognize the risk factors for, and signs of, opioid overdose** and demonstrate the correct use of naloxone (Narcan) rescue.
- 8. Recognize substance use disorders as a chronic disease** that affects individuals and families physically, mentally, spiritually, and socially. Importantly, substance use affects pregnancies and parent-child relationships. Addiction can be treated and recovered from with effective assessment, referral, community supports, and inter-professional collaboration.

9. **Recognize and assess their own and societal stigmas and biases** against individuals suffering from substance use disorders and associated evidence-based medication-assisted treatment to work toward eliminating stigma.
10. **Identify and incorporate relevant information regarding health inequities, current and historical drug policies, criminal justice practices, and related forms of systemic oppression** into planning how to support individuals in the management of their substance use disorder, and **recognize that in order to have a better chance at recovery, an individual's basic needs must be met**, including safe and stable housing, primary health care, mental health care, and access to ongoing support services as needed.

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**Membership of the Governor's Social Work Education  
Working Group on Substance misuse**

**Secretary Marylou Sudders, MSW**  
Executive Office of Health and Human Services

**Commissioner Monica Bharel, MD, MPH**  
Massachusetts Department of Public Health

**Commissioner Joan Mikula**  
Massachusetts Department of Mental Health

**Allison F. Bauer, JD, LISCW**  
Director, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services  
Massachusetts Department of Public Health

**Rebekah Gewirtz, MPA**  
Executive Director  
The National Association of Social Workers, MA Chapter

**Gautam N. Yadama, PhD**  
Dean and Professor  
Boston College School of Social Work

**Thomas Walsh, PhD**  
Associate Dean and MSW Program Director  
Boston College School of Social Work

**Mary Collins**  
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs  
Boston University School of Social Work

**Arnaa Alcon, PhD, MSW**  
Chair, School of Social Work  
Bridgewater State University

**Carol E. Bonner, MSW, MBA, EdD**  
Associate Dean  
Salem State University School of Social Work

**Cheryl A. Parks, MSW, PhD**  
Dean & Professor  
Simmons College

**Marianne Yoshioka**  
Dean  
Smith College School for Social Work

**Francine J. Vecchiolla, MSW, PhD**  
Dean  
Springfield College

**Robert C. Kersting, MSW, PhD**  
Chair Department of Social Work  
M.S.W. Program Director  
Westfield State University

**Hope Haslam Straughan, PhD, MSW, ACSW**  
Interim Dean  
School of Social Work, Leadership, & Youth Advocacy  
Wheelock College