

Specialized
Practice
Curricular Guide
for **Disaster
Relief
Social Work**

VOLUME 1 | Competencies 1–5

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Council on Social Work Education
Alexandria, Virginia

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Acknowledgments

CHAIR AND LEAD CONSULTANT

Stephanie Felder

The Catholic University of America

CO-CHAIRS

Todd A. Cesar

U.S. Public Health Service Corps

Peter Delany

The Catholic University of America

COMPETENCY CHAIRS

Kevin Brown

Southern University at New Orleans

Tonya Cross Hansel

The University of Texas at Arlington

Loc Nguyen

*County Welfare Directors Association
of California*

Johanna Paillet-Growl

U.S. Public Health Service Corps

Tara Powell

*University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign*

David Reynolds

*Harris County Public Health
ACCESS*

Benjamin Roth

University of South Carolina

Shakima Tozay

The University of Alabama

Tiffany Welch

Commonwealth University–Mansfield

Liyun Wu

Norfolk State University

WORK GROUP MEMBERS

David Albright

The University of Alabama

Mary Awuah

U.S. Public Health Service Corps

WORK GROUP MEMBERS

(continued)

Walleska Bliss

*The Chicago School of Professional
Psychology*

Martha Bragin

Hunter College

Shinwoo Choi

Texas State University

Gordon Coombes

*Government Human Services
Organization*

Nyoki Cosey-Brown

*University of Kentucky, Innovative
Approaches Counseling Center*

Christy da Rosa

*Portland State University/Trauma
Informed Oregon*

Shermesia Dean

Grambling State University

Julie Drolet

University of Calgary

Meagan Dunham

The Catholic University of America

Joy Ernst

Wayne State University

Rachel Forbes

University of Denver

Marcia Ford

Washington University in St. Louis

Erika Galyean

Indiana University

Kathy Gardner

Grand Canyon University

Kenyuatia Gash

VISN 4, Department of Veterans Affairs

Allison Gibson

Saint Louis University

Carrie Gonzalez

*Virginia Department of Emergency
Management*

Ken Hammond

*State of Vermont Agency of Human
Services*

Eric Hardiman

*University at Albany, State University
of New York*

India Johns

*Administration for Strategic
Preparedness and Response*

Emmanuel Johnson

Louisiana Christian University

Sara Joyce

American Red Cross

Rachelle Kammer

Fordham University

Shuei Kozu*Southern Connecticut State University***Stephanie Little***Minot State University***Rachel McBride***The University of Oklahoma***Frantishka McCrimmon***American Board of Clinical Social
Work, North Carolina Social Work
Certification and Licensure Board***Debra Nelson-Gardell***The University of Alabama***Mohit Proadhan***Stephen F. Austin State University
(The University of Texas System)***Renee Rawcliffe***Adelphi University***Susan Reay***University of Nebraska Omaha***Jacob Ressler***Indiana University***Jaelyn Reyes***CUNY Graduate Center***Dustin Roberson***West Tennessee Healthcare/University
of Kentucky***Melissa Singh***University of Southern California***Kelly Smith***Columbia University***Joyce Taylor***Southern Connecticut State University***Kate Turcotte***Colby-Sawyer College***Chandler Vidrine***Governor Office, State of Louisiana***Christopher Weatherly***University of Georgia***Phyllis Williams***Winthrop University***Tarek Zidan***Indiana University***COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK
EDUCATION****Megan Fujita***Vice President of Education;
Series Editor, CSWE 2022 EPAS
Curricular Guides***Kristine Luecker***Director, CSWE Press***Andrew Gillis***Director of Innovation and Learning***Heather Donahue***Director of Grants and Special Projects*

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Preface

The *Specialized Practice Curricular Guide for Disaster Relief Social Work* is presented in two volumes to support educators in aligning disaster relief practice competencies with the 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). Volume 1 covers Competencies 1 through 5, focusing on skills such as professional and ethical behavior, research, policy practice, and other areas of practice in disaster contexts. Volume 2 continues with Competencies 6 through 9, addressing engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation, and a 10th competency around self-care and compassion in disaster relief practice.

Together, these volumes offer a comprehensive framework for preparing social workers to practice effectively and ethically in disaster settings, emphasizing both immediate response and long-term recovery.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

In 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) adopted a competency-based education framework for its EPAS. Competency-based education is an outcome-oriented approach to curriculum design. The goal of the outcome approach is to ensure that students can demonstrate the integration and application of the competencies in practice. In the EPAS, competence consists of nine interrelated competencies and component behaviors, which themselves consist of multiple dimensions: knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes.

Competency-based education rests on a shared view of the nature of competence in professional practice. Social work competence is the ability to integrate and apply professional knowledge, values, skills, and judgment to practice in a thoughtful, goal-oriented, and ethical manner that supports individual and

community well-being. The EPAS recognizes a holistic view of competence: that the demonstration of competence is informed by multiple dimensions of competence, including the social worker's critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgment regarding unique practice situations. Overall professional competence is multidimensional and composed of interrelated competencies. An individual social worker's competence is developmental and dynamic, changing over time in relation to continuous learning (CSWE, 2022, p. 7).

Using a curriculum design that begins with the outcomes, expressed as the expected competencies, social work program developers produce the substantive content, pedagogical approaches, and educational activities that provide learning opportunities for students to demonstrate competencies (CSWE, 2022, p. 7).

SOCIAL WORK COMPETENCIES

The 2022 EPAS stipulates nine competencies that prepare students for social work practice. These competencies apply to both generalist and specialized practice. The nine social work competencies are listed in the 2022 EPAS on pages 8–13. Each of the nine social work competencies is followed by a paragraph describing the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes that make up the competency at the generalist level of practice, followed by a bulleted list of behaviors that integrate these components. These behaviors represent observable components of the competencies, and the descriptions that precede them represent the underlying content and processes that inform the behaviors.

SPECIALIZED PRACTICE

Specialized practice builds on generalist practice, as described in Educational Policy (EP) 3.0 of the 2022 EPAS, by extending and enhancing the generalist social work competencies for practice with a specific population, problem area, method of intervention, perspective, or approach to practice.

The master's programs in social work prepare students for specialized practice. Programs identify the specialized knowledge, values, skills, cognitive and affective processes, and behaviors that extend and enhance the nine social work competencies. They prepare students to practice in the area of specialization, and to demonstrate an ability to engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate across client populations, problem areas, and methods of intervention (CSWE, 2022, p. 18).

In each area of specialized practice defined by a program, the program extends and enhances the nine social work competencies so that they are demonstrated in observable behaviors indicative of competence in specialized areas of professional practice. Specialized practitioners synthesize and use the knowledge and skills necessary for interprofessional collaborations based on scientific inquiry and best practices, consistent with social work values (CSWE, 2022, p. 18).

Specialized practitioners advocate with and on behalf of clients and constituencies in their area of specialized practice. They synthesize and use a broad range of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge and skills based on scientific inquiry and best practices and consistent with social work values. Additionally, they engage in and conduct research to inform and improve practice, policy, and service delivery.

FRAMEWORK FOR THE GUIDE

CSWE, in partnership with its Commission on Educational Policy, created a framework for developing curricular guides for areas of specialized practice. The task force followed the guidelines for creating social work competencies and curricular resources for social workers in disaster relief practice settings that reflect accreditation standards for master's programs in the 2022 EPAS, including:

- 1) Identification of an area of specialized practice for a specific population, problem area, method of intervention, perspective, or approach to practice in social work (EP 3.2).
- 2) Identification of the specialized knowledge, values, skills, cognitive and affective processes, and behaviors that extend and enhance the nine social work competencies and prepare students for practice in the area of specialization identified (EP M3.2 and Accreditation Standard [AS] M3.2.1).
- 3) Discussion of how the area of specialized practice builds on generalist practice as described in EP 3.0 (AS M3.2.2).
- 4) Suggested curriculum content and resources (e.g., readings, multimedia and online resources, modules, assignments, experiential exercises, class and field activities) for each of the nine social work competencies and any additional competencies identified.

- 5) Identification of the competency dimensions (knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes) associated with the course content for each competency.

The curriculum content and resources identified in this guide are not required by accreditation standards. They are meant to serve as an optional guide to programs on how to conceptualize disaster relief social work practice with the nine social work competencies identified in the 2022 EPAS.

ORGANIZATION OF THE GUIDE

Congruent with the 2022 EPAS and framework developed by CSWE, specialized practice in disaster relief social work builds on generalist practice but augments and extends social work knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes to engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate within this area of specialized practice. Accordingly, for each of the competencies identified in this guide, there is a paragraph description of the dimensions—knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes—that make up the competency and prepare students for disaster relief social work practice. This is followed by a set of behaviors to be attained by social work students entering practice to work with individuals and systems related to, or affected by, disaster relief practice areas.

Volume 2 of this curricular guide also includes a new competency that is not part of the nine CSWE competencies—Competency 10: Compassion and Self-Care in Disaster Response. CSWE and the chairs of this guide regard this as an essential competency of practice for social workers in disaster relief practice areas.

Readings, in-class exercises, field activities, media, and assignments are identified for each of the competencies, along with whether they address knowledge, values, skills, or cognitive and affective processes. Descriptions of shorter selected assignments and in-class exercises follow each competency; longer activities or additional details are included in the appendices.

REFERENCE

Council on Social Work Education. (2022). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. <https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-EPAS.pdf>

Introduction to Disaster Relief Social Work

The number of individuals, families, and communities affected by natural and human-made disasters continues to grow each year. The International Institute for Environment and Development (2025) estimated that approximately 137 million people—41% of the U.S. population—lived in areas affected by a major disaster or an emergency declaration. These events, including public health crises, climate-driven catastrophes, and mass violence, disproportionately affect some communities by deepening existing challenges with access to care, housing, and public safety. As disasters become more frequent, complex, and prolonged, social workers must be equipped to respond in ways that are ethical and grounded in professional integrity.

Graduate social work education plays a crucial role in preparing students to uphold ethical standards, affirm human dignity, and act in the public interest across various disaster contexts. Social workers operate in a variety of community-based settings, including hospitals, schools, behavioral health clinics, child welfare agencies, and military and veterans' programs. Within these settings, many disaster impacts are acute. This curriculum guide offers faculty the tools to integrate social work education disaster preparedness and response to prepare students to navigate the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of a crisis in a way that affirms core professional values.

Social workers have long contributed to both immediate relief and long-term recovery by offering services that address trauma, displacement, and community rebuilding. Recent high-impact events—such as the COVID-19 pandemic; Hurricane Ian; the California wildfires; the Uvalde, Texas, school shooting; and the East Palestine, Ohio, train derailment—have demonstrated that social

workers are often both helpers and those affected. Local social work practitioners frequently live in communities experiencing the very disasters to which they are responding. They are called to support traumatized populations while simultaneously navigating personal loss, uncertainty, and repeated exposure to distressing media. These overlapping responsibilities highlight the ethical imperative to build a resilient, well-supported workforce whose members can serve others while safeguarding their own well-being.

Ethical and effective disaster response demands that social workers engage with individuals, families, organizations, and communities through integrated practice across micro, mezzo, and macro levels. It requires an awareness of differing community contexts and a respectful, informed approach, which are essential when responding to crises that have uneven impacts across populations. Many interventions are complicated by factors such as differences in health and behavioral conditions, communication barriers, damaged infrastructure, and challenges in coordinating roles and responsibilities. Practitioners must be prepared to work within and across these complexities while upholding professional standards and advancing human rights.

To that end, graduate social work education must cultivate the capacity for critical thinking, advocacy, and systems-level engagement. Training should prepare students to recognize and challenge barriers, such as fragmented care systems, bureaucratic hurdles, and inequitable policy responses, that are exacerbated during times of disaster. By fostering a commitment to social, economic, and environmental well-being, social work programs can empower students to advocate for reforms that address the root causes of vulnerability, not only the symptoms.

Further, programs must equip students to apply research and data to inform decision-making in crisis settings. There is a continuing need for rapid, community-engaged research to assess evolving needs and evaluate what works in disaster-affected communities. Understanding how to collect, interpret, and act on evidence in real time is an essential component for professional social workers within disaster contexts.

The addition of Competency 10, which supports the integration of compassionate practice and self-care as foundational to ethical behavior, is equally critical. Disasters place intense emotional demands on practitioners, and without adequate preparation and support, these pressures can lead to moral distress,

compassion fatigue, and burnout. Embedding trauma stewardship, peer support, and reflective supervision into the educational experience helps foster a sustainable workforce—one that is equipped to respond with both professional excellence and personal resilience.

In sum, preparing social workers for disaster contexts does not require narrowing their training to a single area of focus. Rather, it requires deepening the profession's commitment to ethical conduct, fairness, and systems change. This curriculum guide provides a framework for developing those competencies across the graduate curriculum to ensure that future practitioners can meet the demands of disaster response with skill, integrity, and purpose.

REFERENCE

International Institute for Environment and Development. (2025). *Major disaster in the US declared every four days in 2024, IIED analysis shows*. <https://www.iied.org/major-disaster-us-declared-every-four-days-2024-iied-analysis-shows>