ACCREDITATION RESPONSE TO COVID-19 | FAQs & FIELD GUIDANCE

March 20, 2020

COMMISSION ON ACCREDITATION (COA) STATEMENT OF SUPPORT

What is the COA’s response to how COVID-19 is affecting programmatic accreditation requirements?

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 first priority is the health and safety of its program members, volunteers, staff and social work faculty, staff, students, field personnel, and the clients, constituents, and communities they serve daily across the nation. The Commission takes the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on the educational process seriously. CSWE trusts 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 are available to assist programs as situations arise. Please contact your program’s accreditation specialist, preferably via email, with questions not addressed by this evolving info sheet.

DOSWA is vigilantly monitoring, proactively addressing, and responsive to the ever-shifting educational landscape as impacted by COVID-19. As information emerges, CSWE will continue to distribute up-to-date information to members.

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

- Accreditation-specific COVID-19 Info
- CSWE COVID-19 Response
- Note: This info sheet will be continuously updated and dated

CSWE’s Department of Social Work Accreditation (DOSWA) and the Commission on Accreditation (COA) are responsive to the health and safety of program faculty, staff, students, field personnel, and the clients, constituents, and communities they serve daily. In addition to the important information on the centralized COVID-19 response webpage CSWE continues to curate, this info sheet is intended to address the most frequently asked questions regarding accreditation standards, compliance requirements, and alternative options for fulfilling field education hours. As information emerges, CSWE will continue to distribute up-to-date information to members.

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

The Accreditation Department hosted a CSWE Coronavirus (COVID-19) Response Q&A webinar on Thursday, March 19, 2020 | 2:00pm ET for programs to ask additional questions regarding accreditation standards, compliance requirements, and alternative options for fulfilling field education hours. Future webinars may be scheduled as needed to update programs on options and guidelines.
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 12th. Based on the results, the accreditation team is compiling an online crowd-sourced list of virtual field education tasks/activities, which will soon be linked to this document, which is continuously updated. The list will give all programs access to ideas from survey responses and will allow programs to continue sharing ideas and forming solutions together.

  This resource is free and available for all program stakeholders to contribute to and utilize faculty, field directors, field instructors, students, etc., although we cannot guarantee that all of the ideas in the document will not incur costs. With your input and feedback, the list will be a growing depository of options for addressing field virtually.

- **CSWE Council on Field Education (COFE) Listserv:** email smiddleton@cswe.org to be added to this listserv

- **The Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD) Listserv**

- **National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD) Listserv (for members only)**

**FIELD EDUCATION**

*My program wants to ensure compliance with EPAS; what standards are most affected by this crisis?*

Four accreditation standards in the [2015 EPAS](https://www.cswe.org/pubs/epas/) guide this response:

- **Accreditation Standard 2.2.4:** Current COA interpretation allows “in-person” contact to be accomplished through digital technologies. There is not a minimum requirement regarding direct client contact hours, or a maximum regarding virtual contact hours.

- **Accreditation Standard 2.2.5:** The required minimum of 400 hours of field education for baccalaureate programs and the minimum of 900 hours for master’s programs cannot be waived since this ensures all students graduating from CSWE-accredited programs are held to the same standard and licensing requirements in each state vary. For public assurance of the quality and consistency of social work education in accredited programs.

- **Accreditation Standard 2.2.7:** It is required that programs have policies, procedures, and criteria in place for supporting student safety in field placements.

- **Accreditation Standard 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 of how students can meet field hours?*
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 allow for technology-based social work practice (e.g., telehealth, telework, phone contact with colleagues, clients, and constituents, remote access to platforms and projects, etc.).

Field agencies may work with students to allow/support telework. For example, can students complete client case/paperwork on a secure server, call into meetings, work on projects from home, engage in professional development activities, and meet virtually with their field instructor? Of course, these ideas may not replace all field hours that may be missed due to a crisis, yet perhaps can serve close the gap. Such telework solutions can be temporary while 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, PSAs, email blasts, etc.) 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 engage in specific to their agency regarding Hurricane Maria aftermath. This included a student at a mental health agency creating fliers with information about local services for basic needs and support groups offered to begin healing from traumatic experiences.
- Another example, during the Flint Water Crisis, students worked with local congregations to organize bottled water collection and distribution.
- In the case of a public health issue, for example, students may engage in number of activities including:
  - Help with public education about staying healthy
  - Connect clients to Medicaid/Medicare or other affordable healthcare 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 their clients may need
  - Work on projects or plans for future events or initiatives
  - Engage in virtual professional development to assist them in their agency (e.g., webinars, DSM review, informational interviews with partner organizations, etc.)
  - Craft awareness efforts via placement’s social media accounts
  - Compose advocacy writings to elected officials about issues and legislation the agency is connected to/populations they serve
  - Etc.

**What are programs to do when both our institution and field agencies are closed?**

Both institutions and field agencies have their own policies and procedures when confronted with an emergency. Constituent and stakeholder safety are of the utmost importance. Institutions, programs, and field agencies are to work together to ensure programs maintain compliance with the required number of hours per AS 2.2.5. The number of hours required cannot be waived because it is tied to licensing requirements in many states and to the quality and consistency of social work education in accredited programs.

**Does CSWE have a limit on the number of virtual in-person contact hours a student can count toward their field hours?**
It is within the program’s purview to determine a limit (if any) on virtual in-person contact hours. The EPAS do not limit the number of virtual hours a student may count toward their required field hours.

**Can students count simulated practice situations toward field hours?**

Simulated practice situations, including classroom-based field seminar courses, may supplement the student's education, but not replace required field education hours (AS 2.2.5, *2015 EPAS Interpretation Guide*). Simulated practice situations are defined in the *2015 EPAS Glossary*. In the classroom the program may consider a few extra touchpoints for simulating working with clients and constituents’ groups to support (not replace) required field hours.

**Do field seminar hours count toward field hours? Does field seminar include assignments or just the classroom hours? Do asynchronous seminars count?**

Field seminar, synchronous or asynchronous, hours may count toward field hours. Field seminar classroom hours may count toward field hours. Time dedicated to completing seminar assignments, activities, or homework may not count toward field hours.

**What are alternative ways students can continue to be supervised and does this count toward field hours?**

Supervision can be counted toward student field hours. There are no requirements for the frequency/method of supervision whether this be face-to-face or virtual. Should field instructors be unable to supervise students that 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?**

Accreditation standards require a minimum number of required hours for field education 400 hours for baccalaureate programs and 900 hours for master’s programs (AS 2.2.5). If the program requires additional hours above and beyond the minimum per AS 2.2.5, the program may choose to reduce or eliminate the additional hours.

**Can BSW field hours be counted for MSW advanced standing students?**

For master’s programs only, with an advanced standing status option, the program ensures that advanced standing students complete a total of 900 field education hours between their accredited baccalaureate and master’s social work programs. For example, if a BSW student completed 450 field hours, then as an MSW student, they need only complete 450 hours should the program permit (AS 2.2.5, *2015 EPAS Interpretation Guide*).

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

It is within the program’s purview to determine the systems levels students have in-person contact with to complete the required field hours, as well as the number of hours per each systems level (if any). The standards do 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, should the program permit.
How do these accommodations apply when both our institution and field agencies are closed?

Both institutions and field agencies have their own policies and procedures when confronted with an emergency that impacts the general public as well as its stakeholders. The constituent and stakeholder (i.e., students) safety is of the utmost importance for both the institution and field agencies. If field agencies are going to or have closed, they must contact all involved parties, including the student and program's field director. Institutions who have closed must follow suit. Institutions and field agencies need to work together to ensure that students' educational goals and needs are met as it relates to field education and the CSWE standard.

Does CSWE have any guidance on planning for Summer or Fall 2020 field placements?

At this time, COA is vigilantly monitoring, proactively addressing, and responsive to the ever-shifting educational landscape as impacted by COVID-19. Currently, there is not any additional guidance on planning for future field placements as the landscape remains unknown.

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 their choosing.

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, their community, and their unique challenges. Ultimately it is the responsibility of social work programs in conjunction with their host institutions to make decisions and accommodations about risk management, safety, the 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, healthcare providers, or other educational programs, such as schools of nursing or education, may provide input on consistent safety policies. We also encourage programs to connect with their state-based social work licensing board, state higher education authority, and regional accredits 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?

At this time, the COA nor accreditation department is not 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), do not require reporting to the COA nor the accreditation department.

REAFFIRMATION & CANDIDACY ACCREDITATION DOCUMENTS

My program’s candidacy/reaffirmation accreditation document is due this spring. Are extensions available to programs?
Yes, options for extensions are available to programs that have materials due to CSWE in the Spring (April 1 deadline) or Summer (August 1 deadline) but are unable to complete accreditation work because of their institutions’ response to the coronavirus. Contact Mary Kurfess, Director of Accreditation, at mkurfess@cswe.org and copy your program’s accreditation specialist and type "COVID-19: Spring/Summer Extension Request" in the subject line. Please include a brief description of your program’s situation. For all other due dates, please reach out to 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 effect writing an accreditation document?**

Nearing the submission due date of the accreditation document, the program is encouraged to work with their accreditation specialist and discuss their unique case and how it was documented. Please note that the Integrity Policy (1.1.15 in the EPAS Handbook) states 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.

**ASSESSMENT**

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

Programs are encouraged to continue with their assessment plans to the extent possible. The Commission on Accreditation recognizes that assessment outcomes will likely be negatively impacted by disruptions to class instruction and field. Programs who are reporting assessment outcomes from spring 2020 as part of their 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 and program changes explicit curriculum assessment and implicit curriculum assessment.

**SPRING 2020 SITE VISITS**

**My program has an upcoming site visit this Spring 2020. How is the site visit affected?**

Reaffirmation and candidacy site visits will be conducted through virtual meetings, instead of on-site meetings, through May 2020. See guidelines for virtual site visits at https://cswe.org/CSWE/media/AccreditationPDFs/Message-to-site-visitors-for-spring-2020.pdf. The virtual meeting 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, future employment prospective. 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, staff, students, field personnel, and the clients, constituents, and communities they serve. Plans 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 with regard to students in field education. Ultimately, how the program incorporates the information provided by CSWE into their contingency/continuity plan is within their 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 advised to provide feedback and share concerns directly with the program and/or institutional leadership teams regarding their contingency/continuity plan and field education hours.

**What guidance should be provided to students regarding safety?**

Whether social work students are practicing onsite or virtually, it is vital to continue promoting good hygiene practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory diseases:

- Stay home if you are sick and advise others to do the same.
- Always cover coughs or sneezes with a tissue or sleeve.
- 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.).


Programs and students may also visit the following website for further information:

- [World Health Organization (WHO)](https://www.who.int)
- [National Association of Social Workers (NASW)](https://www.nasw.org)
- [National Institutes of Health](https://www.nih.gov)
- [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services](https://www.cms.gov)

Thank you for your patience during this difficult time when the accreditation team is dealing with an unprecedented situation. CSWE is doing its 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 addresses the spread of COVID-19. If your program has contacted an accreditation 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**