Public Health
Social Work Standards
and Competencies

May 2005

Introduction

In September 1998, the Beyond Year 2010: Public Health. Social Work Practice Project that Dot Bon (North Carolina) and I co-directed, held a Future Search Conference in Chapel Hill, N.C. Conference participants included public health social work leaders, practitioners, educators, community advocates, representatives of national organizations and' foundations, policymakers and consumers. Participants worked intensively for three days to create a future vision of pubic health social work practice and action plans. The Standards Working Group was formed at the conference and took on the enormous challenge of developing a definition of public health social work and practice standards. Along the way, this group held numerous conference calls and in-person meetings. The group worked with Paul Halverson at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention solicited feedback from state public health social work departments, practitioners and social work educators. The results of their collaboration and persistence are the Standards and Competencies for Public Health Social Work Practice published in this brochure.

I wish to acknowledge the work of the many dedicated individuals who participated in this exciting effort and give special thanks to two individuals who provided the primary leadership to the Standards Work Group, Loretta Fuddy (Hawaii) and Deborah Stokes (Ohio). I also want to thank the members of the Association of State and Territorial Public Health Social Workers for their commitment to finalizing and disseminating these Standards of Competencies. We hope you will use these practice standards and competencies to guide your practice and workforce development efforts in public health social work.

Kathleen Rounds, Ph.D., MPH, MSW
Professor and Director, PHSW Leadership Training Program
School of Social Work, University of North Carolina

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work, Beyond 2010 Public Health Social Work Initiative, Association of State and Territorial Public Health Social Workers, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Public Health Association Social Work Section, National Association of Social Work, Association of Teachers of Maternal and Child Health and the Maternal and Child Heath Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration for their contributions in creating this document.

Special thanks to the Standards Development Committee. They are:
Joseph Telfair, Alabama;
Lann Thompson, Indiana;
Judith LeConte, Washington;
Elizabeth Watkins, North Carolina;
Ruth Knee, Washington D.C.;
Deborah Schild, Michigan;
Rita Webb, Washington, DC;
Marvin "Reg" Hutchinson, South Carolina;
Theora Evans, Tennessee;
Loretta Fuddy, Hawaii;
DeLois Dilworth-Berry, Indiana;
Deborah Stokes, Ohio;
Kathleen Rounds, North Carolina;
Paul Halverson, Georgia;
Dot Bon, North Carolina;
and
Amy Smith, Barbara Thomas and Janice Houchins (Ohio, Social Work Interns).

Definition of Public Health Social Work

The major characteristic of public health social work is an epidemiological approach to identifying social problems affecting the health status and social functioning of all population groups, with an emphasis on intervention at the primary prevention level. Public health social workers focus on the promotion of positive health behaviors in the development of lifestyles by individuals, families and groups; enhancement by the environment; and avoidance of risks. They assess the health needs of the target population and determine the association between social factors and the incidence of health problems. They plan and implement intervention strategies based on the five levels of prevention. They emphasize reducing the social stress associated with health problems and determining the social supports that promote well-being and provide protection against ill health and minimize disability and institutionalization. The practice of public health social work is usually conducted within the context of a multi-disciplinary setting where social workers participate with other health and human service professionals in assuring all persons in the target population have access to health care and social services. Public health social work is a blending of roles: provider of direct services, researcher, consultant, administrator, program planner, evaluator and policymaker. Each function is dependent upon the other in assuring the health and social needs of the total population.

Public Health Social Work Philosophy

Public Health Social Workers address health from a broad perspective that includes physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being throughout the continuum of the life cycle. They address health issues by identifying and implementing strategies/interventions through pivotal times of transition from one phase of individual development to another. Public Health Social Work assures the competency of its practice to address the issues of public health effectively through a core body of social work knowledge, philosophy, code of ethics and standards.

Public Health Social Work Standards

Professional Standard #1

Public Health Social Work (PHSW) uses social epidemiology principles to assess and monitor social problems affecting the health status and social functioning of at-risk populations within the context of family, community and culture.

PHSW Performance Indicators

1.1 PHSW assures assessment and monitoring tools are based on social epidemiology principles.

1.2 PHSW assures assessment and monitoring tools are developed through an interdisciplinary collaborative process with input from intra/interagency, community partners/consumers and diverse populations.

1.3 PHSW assures assessment and monitoring tools are relevant to the full continuum of physical and social well-being through all stages of the life cycle.

1.4 PHSW develops guidelines for sharing health status and social functioning data with community partners to facilitate optimal individual and societal well-being.

1.5 PHSW tracks health. status and social functioning of the general population to monitor the progress of the at risk population over time for:

- Individuals and families at the direct-practice level:
- Community programs and policy development.

Professional Standard #2

Public Health Social Work uses social epidemiology principles to identity and assess the factors associated with resiliency, strengths and assets that promote optimal health.

PHSW Performance Indicators

2.1 PHSW promotes an assets-based model for assessing physical and emotional health at the individual, family and community levels.

2.2 PHSW seeks to identify factors which promote individual, family and community resiliency. These factors are culturally based and supported by a broad range of community partners.

2.3 PHSW identifies protective factors for individuals, families and communities.

2.4 PHSW develops creative tools to measure strengths and/or assets that promote and protect the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities.

2.5 PHSW identifies and assesses factors that help individuals, families and communities to change behaviors and environmental risk factors that trigger disease.

2.6 PHSW identifies factors that reduce the intensity of crises and enhances adaptation.

Professional Standard # 3

Public Health Social Work uses social epidemiology principles to identity, measure and assess the social factors contributing to health issues, health hazards and stress associated with ill health.

PHSW Performance Indicators

3.1 PHSW identifies and assesses risk factors related to social conditions.

3.2 PHSW develops interventions that address the social factors related to mental and physical health, illness and disability.

3.3 PHSW applies explanatory models to assist in identifying social factors which contribute to disease, emotional and social functioning.

3.4 PHSW identifies the relationships between poor housing, poor working conditions and poverty and high rates of infant mortality, tuberculosis and behavioral and other health issues.

3.5 PHSW identifies and measures risk of behaviors and lifestyle choices which contribute to poor social functioning and ill health.

Professional Standard #4

Public Health Social Work uses social epidemiology principles to evaluate the effectiveness, accessibility and quality of individual, family and population-based health interventions.

PHSW Performance Indicators

4.1 PHSW develops criteria for measuring program interventions and determining their effectiveness.

4.2 PHSW establishes outcome measures that analyze the effectiveness, accessibility and quality of individual and population-based interventions.

4.3 PHSW develops tools that measure changes in physical and coping capacity, environmental resources and health.

4.4 PHSW assures that qualitative and quantitative evaluation tools are developed to determine accessibility, quality, effectiveness and cultural competency of individual, family and population-based health interventions.
PHSW develops mechanisms to utilize evaluation results to enhance individual, family and population based health interventions, service delivery and quality.

4.5 PHSW develops mechanisms to utilize evaluation results to enhance individual, family and population based health interventions, service delivery and quality.

4.6 PHSW develops tools that measure emotional and societal morbidity affecting access to and utilization of the public health system of care.

Professional Standard #5

Public Health Social Work uses social planning, community organizational development, and social marketing principles to inform and educate individuals, families and communities about public health issues.

PHSW Performance Indicators

5.1 PHSW identifies public health issues relevant to individuals, families and communities by:
1. Surveying individuals, families and communities to determine baseline knowledge of public health issues; and
2. Combining data and research with community priorities.

5.2 PHSW develops a range of community-based and creative strategies to deliver healthy lifestyle messages such as:
1. Culturally relevant forums;
2. Media opportunities;
3. Community meetings;
4. Youth speak-outs; and
5. Health fairs.

5.3 PHSW utilizes the resources of faith communities and social and cultural groups to disseminate materials and speak on the value of public health by focusing on a public health problem facing that community.

5.4 PHSW develops public education messages that promote strategies of protection and resilience to enhance emotional, social and physical well-being.

5.5 PHSW develops communication methods for individuals, families and communities that make the information relevant and clear to all ages, cultural groups, educational levels and abilities.

5.6. PHSW educates social service organizations about the relationships between health and social functioning from a public health perspective.

5.7 PHSW collaborates with a range of health and social service professionals and organizations to develop consistent health messages to inform and educate the public.

5.8 PHSW educates individuals, families and communities about the relationship between health and social functioning, specifically as it relates to risk-taking behaviors and poor health outcomes.

5.9 PHSW utilizes developmentally appropriate learning principles when developing public health messages.

5.10 PHSW develops strategies for promoting public health messages to specific populations such as those in institutional settings.

Professional Standard #6

Public Health Social Work uses social planning, community organizational. development and social marketing principles to empower and mobilize individuals, families -and communities to become active participants in identifying and addressing public health concerns to improve individual, family and societal well-being.

PHSW Performance Indicators

6.1 PHSW develops a collaborative network of diverse stakeholders to identify, prioritize and develop solutions to health and social problems.

6.2 PHSW encourages at-risk or vulnerable populations to become active members and leaders of these efforts.

6.3 PHSW mobilizes community collaboratives to identify, prioritize and address health and related social issues.

6.4 PHSW validates practice methodologies to assure proposed strategies respect the values and priorities of diverse groups.

6.5 PHSW develops new resources (financial and infrastructure) that support activities surrounding community collaborations.

6.6 PHSW conducts capacity-building activities that provide individuals, families and communities with the tools to creatively resolve public health issues.

6.7 PHSW utilizes practice methodologies that promote the acceptance of culturally relevant and respectful communication strategies to engage communities.

6.8 PHSW mentors the leadership ability of individuals, families and communities to creatively resolve public health concerns.

6.9 PHSW helps individuals, families and communities preserve their culture by identifying their assets and liabilities in resolving their issues.

6.10 PHSW establishes communication strategies within the public health system that are responsive to community issues, priorities and solutions. These strategies identify barriers that limit active participation of diverse populations.

6.11 PHSW promotes an interdisciplinary planning model that integrates and enhances the medical model and traditional public health planning process to address the needs of vulnerable and diverse populations.

Professional Standard #7

Public Health Social Work uses social planning, community organizational development and social marketing to promote and enforce legal requirements that protect the health and safety of individuals, families and communities.

PHSW Performance Indicators

7.1 PHSW develops and promotes regulations that assure access to needed health and social services for all, especially for vulnerable .and underserved populations.

7.2 PHSW educates communities about legal rights and requirements and how these rights impact health and well-being.

7.3 PHSW advocates for communities in the identification of abating environmental concerns affecting health.

7.4 PHSW provides leadership in the enforcement and simplification of rules related to entitlements and services.

7.5 PHSW provides pertinent data to stakeholders to impact environmental regulations.

Professional Standard #8

Public Health Social Work uses social planning, community organizational development and social marketing to assure public accountability for the well being of all, with emphasis on vulnerable and underserved populations.

PHSW Performance Indicators

8.1 PHSW creates culturally diverse partnerships with policymakers, funders and community groups that delineate clear and responsible roles in assuring the wellbeing for all with the emphasis on vulnerable and underserved populations.

8.2 PHSW documents and responds to individual, family and community concerns about the delivery and practice of health and related social services.

8.3 PHSW provides leadership in the dissemination of information about the effectiveness of public health and social interventions to policymakers, funders and community groups.

8.4 PHSW assists communities in the development of a public health agenda that assures accountability for the well-being of all.

Professional Standard #9

Public Health Social Work uses social planning, community organizational development and social marketing to develop primary prevention strategies that promote the health and. well-being of individuals, families and communities.

PHSW Performance Indicators

9.1 PHSW promotes a wide range of primary prevention strategies, both traditional and non-traditional, which are relevant to diverse populations across the life cycle.

9.2 PHSW includes a broad range of stakeholders in developing primary prevention interventions to promote optimal health (e.g., spiritual, emotional, psychological, bio-physical and social).

9.3 PHSW develops common and consistent messages utilizing interdisciplinary teams and collaborative groups to promote healthy and culturally relevant lifestyles.

9.4 PHSW assures primary prevention strategies address root causes of the essential elements of health and wellbeing from a cultural perspective.

Professional Standard # 10

Public Health Social Work uses social planning, community organizational development and social marketing to develop secondary and tertiary prevention strategies to alleviate health and related social and economic concerns.

PHSW Performance Indicators

10.1 PHSW utilizes traditional, non-traditional and culturally relevant methods to develop secondary and tertiary prevention intervention strategies.

10.2 PHSW engages a broad range of stakeholders, including family members, in developing secondary and tertiary prevention interventions to promote optimal health and the remediation of poor health outcomes.

10.3 PHSW develops common, consistent and culturally competent screening and assessment methods for early identification of behaviors and risk factors which contribute to poor health outcomes.

10.4 PHSW assures secondary prevention strategies address root causes of poor health outcomes beyond the presenting signs and symptoms.

10.5 PHSW promotes a range of secondary and tertiary prevention strategies which are relevant to diverse populations throughout the life cycle.

10.6 PHSW develops culturally relevant strategies to enhance quality of life of individuals and families living with a chronic or terminal disease.

10.7 PHSW assures tertiary preventions are individualized through the use of family-centered, community-based, integrated, culturally competent and coordinated care.

Professional Standard # 11

Public Health Social Work provides leadership and advocacy to assure the elimination of health and social disparities wherever they exist such as, but not limited to, those based on community, race, age, gender, ethnicity, culture or disability.

PHSW Performance Indicators

11.1 PHSW provides leadership in presenting research and data in a manner which documents health and social disparities clearly and comprehensively.

11.2 PHSW advocates for a broad range of strategies with diverse stakeholders to eliminate health and social disparities at local, state and national levels.

11.3 PHSW works with vulnerable communities to promote coordinated and integrated interventions for the reduction and elimination of health and social disparities.

11.4 PHSW provides leadership to inform policymakers about the economic, environmental and social factors impacting health and social disparities.

11.5 PHSW develops, in conjunction with other social and public health disciplines, methods to document health and social disparities.

11.6 PHSW advocates for policies that address health and social disparities.

11.7 PHSW advocates for eliminating categorical funding streams in order to reduce barriers to service provision and to better address the magnitude of health and social disparities wherever they exist.

Professional Standard # 12

Public Health Social Work provides leadership and advocacy to assure and promote policy development for providing quality and comprehensive public health services within a cultural, community and family context.

PHSW Performance Indicators

12.1 PHSW develops and promotes public health and social policy that assures the health and safety of all, especially for vulnerable and underserved populations.

12.2 PHSW develops public health and social policy that assures vulnerable and underserved populations have access to needed health and social services.

12.3 PHSW provides leadership in the development and simplification of rules related to entitlements and services.

12.4 PHSW collaborates with social service organizations, educational institutions and related health professional organizations to support policy development and legislative action that promotes the optimal health of a community.

12.5 PHSW develops and maintains mechanisms that promote open dialogue between policymakers and the community.

12.6 PHSW develops public health and social policies to .assure provision of quality services which are responsive to individual, family, community and cultural needs.

12.7 PHSW develops public health and social policies that promote integration and coordination of services across health and social service programs.

Professional Standard #13

Public Health Social Work supports and conducts data collection, research and evaluation.

PHSW Performance Indicators

13.1 PHSW develops and utilizes culturally appropriate data collection systems to identify social arid behavioral determinants of health status for individuals and populations.

13.2 PHSW contributes to the development and utilization c culturally appropriate qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods to assess the effectiveness of specific programs and interventions with emphasis on the need of vulnerable populations.

13.3 PHSW contributes to the development and utilization 0 methodologies to document system barriers that affect the delivery of quality and comprehensiveness of services.

13.4 PHSW conducts or participates in interdisciplinary public health research that promotes the replication and implementation of best practice models.

13.5 PHSW conducts surveys that can be used to measure for ongoing quality improvement.

13.6 PHSW develops measures of emotional and societal factors which affect health status and access to public health.

13.7 PHSW develops results-oriented methodologies for the continuous improvement of the public health service system.

Professional Standard #14

Public Health Social Work assures the competency of its practice to address the issues of public health effectively through a core body of social work knowledge, philosophy, code of ethics, and standards.

PHSW Performance Indicators

14.1 PHSW incorporates standards of care from a range of social work and health organizations.

14.2 PHSW adheres to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics and the American Public Health Association Creed.

14.3 PHSW practices its profession in accordance with state licensure and/or regulations.

14.4 PHSW collaborates with social work and public health faculty to formulate a core body of knowledge and principles for public health social work practices.

14.5 PHSW advocates for including public health social work in publicly and privately funded training programs such as those through Health Resource Services Administration, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

14.6 PHSW develops professional competencies that enhance the skill base of public health social work.

14.7 PHSW conducts periodic work force analyses and studies about public health social work changing roles.

14.8 PHSW conducts periodic surveys to identify ongoing continuing education needs.

14.9 PHSW advocates for the hiring of appropriate personnel with the expertise to address the economic, environmental and social factors that impact health status.

14.10 PHSW develops guidelines and protocols and provides consultation for training in public health social work methodologies in public health agencies.

14.11 PHSW interprets the roles and concepts of public health social work practice to other health and social service disciplines.

14.12 PHSW promotes the social work philosophy of public health being broad-based that encompasses but is not limited to the physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being of individuals, families and communities throughout the continuum of the life cycle.

Public Health Social Workers
Core Competencies

A. Theoretical Base

Public Health Social Workers will demonstrate knowledge and adhere to:
1. The principles of social epidemiology.

2. The principles and theories of population-based health promotion and empowerment.

3. The normal patterns of individual and family growth and development from an intergenerational and lifespan perspective.

4. The impact of economic, environmental and social issues for at-risk populations.

5. The impact of protective or risk factors, e.g. gender, racism, ageism, classism, sexual orientation, sexual identity, disability or religious basis on the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities.

6. The theories and principles of community organization, planned change and development.

7. The characteristics of health systems, including the dimensions of, use of and access to health care. .

8. Macro-level public health social work practice methods in the promotion and enforcement of regulations (policies and legislation) formulated to protect the health and safety of at-risk populations.

Public Health Social Workers should demonstrate the following skills:

9. Application of macro-level public health social work methods, e.g., social planning, community organization/development and Social marketing.

10. Utilize demographic data.

11. Critical analyses of inequities in health status based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic position and gender.

12. Recognize various strengths, needs, values and practices of diverse cultural, racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups to determine .how these factors affect health status, health behaviors and program design.

13. Application of primary, secondary and tertiary strategies to address the health, social and economic issues of individuals, families and communities.

14. Utilize practice and epidemiologic theories to substantiate interventions and programming designed to promote health and behavioral change.

B. Methodological and Analytical Process

Public Health Social Workers will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

1. Research design, sampling, basic descriptive and inferential statistics and validity/reliability assessment of measures.

2. Epidemiological/socio-epidemiological concepts.

3. The use of data to illuminate ethical, political, scientific, economic, social and overall public health issues.

4. Principles and key features of community needs assessment, program design, implementation and evaluations.

Public Health Social Workers should demonstrate the following skills:

5. Collection and interpretation of data from vital statistics, censuses, surveys, service utilization and other relevant reports on social and health status for all, especially vulnerable and underserved populations.

6. Detection of meaningful inferences from data and translation of data into information for community assessment (gaps, barriers and strengths analysis), program planning, implementation and evaluation.

7. Formulation of hypotheses or research questions in collaboration with internal or external resources for the development and implementation of an analytical strategy to influence health and social planned change.

C. leadership and Communication

Public Health Social Workers will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

1. Organizational culture and change.

2. Leadership and communication practices for diverse internal and external groups.

3. Networking inter-multidisciplinary team building and group work processes.

4. Social work community organization and coalition building to address the issues of social and health disparities.

5. Strategies for soliciting and maintaining consumer and other constituencies involved at all levels of an organization.

6. Strategic planning, organizational development, performance outcome measures and program evaluation activities

Public Health Social Workers should demonstrate the following skills:

7. Articulate a vision and motivate staff to actualize the mission, goals and objectives of their organization (public health).

8. Commit to individuals, families and communities and the diverse cultural values they hold.

9. Operationalize best practice prevention and intervention strategies to eliminate social inequity and health disparities.

10. Build on the strengths and assets of individuals, families and communities to develop innovative and applying creative solutions to social and health issues.

11. Applying management and organizational theories and practices to the development, planning, budgeting, staffing, administration and evaluation of public health programs including the implementation of strategies promoting integrated service systems, especially for vulnerable populations.

12. Develop mechanisms to monitor and evaluate programs and service networks for their effectiveness and quality, including the use of performance and outcome measures.

13. Develop, implement, monitor and evaluate grant-funded programs.

14. Written and oral communication skills, including accurate and effective preparation and presentation of reports to stakeholders e.g., agency boards, administrative organizations, policymakers, consumers and/or the media using demographic, statistical, programmatic and scientific information.

15. Communicate effectively with diverse and multi-cultural organizations community/consumer boards and coalitions.

16. Develop strategies to assure integrated service systems for populations at risk for health and social issues.

D. Policy and Advocacy

Public Health Social Workers will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

1. Federal and state mandates that guide the funding and implementation of health and social services programs.

2. Synthesizing of contemporary and alternative health and social policies.

3. Legislative, administrative and judicial processes at the national, state and local levels.

4. The historical development and scientific basis of public health and social policies and practices for federal, state and local agencies.

Public Health Social Workers should demonstrate the following skills:

5. Applying critical thinking to every stage of policy development and practice.

6. Identifying essential gaps in the delivery system of health and social services.

7. Identifying public health laws, regulations and policies related to specific programs.

8. Collecting and summarizing data relevant to a particular policy/problem.

9. Coalition building and agenda setting to address the gaps in the system of social welfare and health care.

10. State the feasibility and expected outcomes of and barriers to achieving each policy option and decide on the appropriate course of action.

11. Clearly writing concise policy statements, position papers and/or testimonies appropriate for a specific audiences.

12. Implement a program plan, including goals, outcomes and process objectives.

E. Values and Ethics

Public Health Social Workers will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

1. Philosophy, values and social justice concepts associated with public health and social work practices.

2. The National Association of Social Work's Code of Ethics and the American Public Health Association Creed.

3. Philosophical concepts and rationale underlying the delivery of family-centered, comprehensive, integrated, community-based and culturally competent public health and social services and programs, including the recognition of family and community assets.

4. Principles and issues involved in the ethical and sensitive conduct of practice and research for all, especially with vulnerable and underserved populations.

5. Ethical issues in the organization and delivery of public health services within communities and governmental agencies including the collection of data and their management analysis and dissemination.

6. State licensure and/or regulations.

Public Health Social Workers should demonstrate the following skills:

7. Integration of professional values mid principles of ethics within community and organizational practice settings.

8. Ethical conduct in program management, research and data collection and storage.

9. Cultural competence within public health settings.

10. Partnerships with public health and social services communities and constituencies to foster community empowerment, reciprocal learning and

involvement in design, implementation, and research aspects of public health and social systems.

11. Utilization of social work standards and principles in the resolution of ethical dilemmas.

Printing supported by Health Community Access Program and The Maternal Child and Health Block Grant.

Ohio Department of Health

To protect and improve the health of all Ohioans

Bob Taft Governor
J. Nick Baird, MD Director of Health

An equal opportunity employer/provider