

In Support of Creating a National Committee on Disability

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Introduction

Summary

Action at a national scale is needed from NASW to advance disability inclusion in the social work profession due to barriers in academic programs, employment and professional associations.

The intent of this document is to illustrate the need for NASW to create a National Committee on Disability to support the equitable participation of disabled social workers in the profession, advocate for disability related issues, advance disability inclusion and promote well-being.

Demographics

A 2018 report identified that an estimated 1 in 4, around 61 million, U.S. adults reported having at least one disability (Okoro et al., 2018). Alongside experiences of disability, intersectional experiences of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality and age exist and can often magnify barriers.

In employment, a 2023 Department of Labor report showed that,

- Across all age groups, disabled people were much less likely to be employed than those with no disability and
- The unemployment rate for disabled people was about twice as high as the rate for persons without a disability (DOL, 2023).

Additionally, a 2019 research brief showed that having a disability is linked to lower employment rates for all racial/ethnic groups, highlighting that while over one-third of those identifying as white (36%) or Hispanic (34%) with disabilities are employed, less than one-quarter of those identifying as African American with disabilities (23%) are employed (Brooks, 2019).

In higher education, a National Center for Education Statistics report showed 19.4% of undergraduate and 11.9% of post-baccalaureate students in the US reported having a disability in 2015–2016.

- In undergraduate students, the distribution of male and female students with disabilities was equal. For graduate students, more women (13.3%) than men (9.9%) identified as having a disability. It should be noted at the time of this

document, no research on gender identities outside the gender binary were identified.

- Racial identities cited among undergraduate students with disabilities included American Indian/Alaska Native (27.8%), Pacific Islander (22.1%), students with two or more races (20.8%), White (20.8%), Hispanic (18.3), Black (17.2%) and Asian (15.2%). For graduate students, racial identity demographics for disabled students included two or more races (19.7%), Pacific Islander (14.9%), Hispanic (14.3%), White (13%), American Indian/Alaska Native (11.8%) Black (10.3) and Asian (6.2%) (Snyder, 2019).

Connections to Broader Goals

A National Committee on Disability fits well within NASW’s overall mission and creation of this Committee would advance the Association’s stated commitment of being “the example for other associations” mentioned on the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion page of the NASW website (NASW, n.d.-a). It should be noted that disability is not mentioned on this page.

Additionally, projects such as the Grand Challenges of Social Work (from the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare) and at a more global scale, the Sustainable Development Goals (from The United Nations), each have goals specifically tied to the importance of disability inclusion and well-being.

Process

According to the NASW bylaws, committees must be created by the NASW President with consent of the Board.

Article IX

“Additional committees and task forces may be created and abolished by the Association President with the advice and consent of the NASW Board of Directors as necessary to plan and review the goals and purposes of the Association”

Illustration of Need

In Social Work Education

Barriers in Internships. In the limited available research, identified issues regarding field placements include decreased internship opportunities due to a lack of accommodations, a lack of awareness and support, and students feeling pressured to choose placements based on accessibility rather than placements that would advance their social work career. (Kattari et al., 2020). In a survey of 262 U.S. students who identified as having a disability, less than 15% received field placement accommodations (Sellmaier & Kim, 2021).

Lack of Priority in Social Work Programs. In a scoping review of 34 articles across 29 years, researchers found that “despite awareness of challenges for students with disabilities, addressing disability seems to be a low program priority, and the literature suggests that neither students nor faculty feel confident of program capacity to meet this challenge” and that not one of the papers reviewed reported “measured outcome effects or student impacts of any proactive measures” (DeZelar et al., 2022).

Universal Design in SW Education. Sherwood and Kattari (2021) propose Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as one “potential solution for reducing ableism in institutions of higher education and the field of social work”. Their research suggests that “programs have the opportunity and obligation to provide more access, training, and education on individuals with disabilities. This includes access for individuals with disabilities to social work programs, more disability content, and access to curriculum via UDL practices” (Sherwood and Kattari, 2021). Universal Design for Learning also supports issues surrounding digital accessibility and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

Additionally, in a separate 2020 study on uncovering ableism in social work education, 50% of faculty members with disabilities reported keeping Universal Design in mind when designing their courses, while less than 20% of non-disabled faculty reported considering Universal Design (Kattari et al., 2020).

In Social Work Employment

Employment Barriers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the 2022 labor force participation rate for people with disabilities was 21.3%, compared to 65.4% for people without disabilities - a gap of 44% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Kiesel et al. (2019) provides a significant look at employment barriers in social work. The authors note five themes that emerged in their research: “anticipation and experience of hiring discrimination, accommodation confusion, disappointment with the social work profession, disability makes one a better social worker, and this could be different (and better)”.

The article highlights the challenges that social workers with disabilities experience “in the pursuit of employment, the need for accommodation, feeling accepted and supported, and being able to fulfill one’s potential as a social worker”. Additionally, complexities of navigating insurance needs, discrimination and misunderstandings about the ADA and fear of perceptions when asking for accommodations were noted as barriers.

Lack of Disability & Accessibility Knowledge in Workplaces. Two examples of commonly mentioned barriers to social work employment are digital accessibility and employer’s requirements for a driver’s license. This driver’s license requirement is an issue mentioned frequently in the NASW discussion forums as well as other spaces online and in person. A 2019 article on SWHelper.org recalls this issue, saying “employers requiring someone to have a driver’s license and vehicle to get to work is ableist. It discounts the work myself and so many others have put in. It is discriminatory, and it needs to stop” (Skonecki, 2019).

Further evidence of the lack of disability and accessibility knowledge in the workplace is shown by what Kiesel et al. (2019) calls ‘failure of imagination’. They note “many of the experiences of pursuing, acquiring, and maintaining employment reflected a failure of imagination regarding accommodation; a limited capacity to reconceptualize how a social work job can be successfully performed”. This capacity, essentially employer flexibility and commitment to a collaborative problem-solving process, is a key concept in ensuring that disabled social workers have equitable opportunities.

Social Worker Burnout. Large caseloads, stressful working conditions and expectations of overwork contribute to high levels of burnout in social work. While individual self-care is one aspect of defense against this, it is only a part of the broader solution and systemic barriers that contribute to burnout in the profession also have the opportunity to disproportionately impact social workers with disabilities.

Brown et. al (2019) emphasizes the “need for organizations employing social workers to foster work environments which provide a climate of wellness, support, and recognition of employees’ contributions” and Barck-Holst et. al, (2021) highlighted the potential for reduced working hours (a common disability accommodation) as a means of lowering emotional exhaustion.

In Professional Associations

Lack of Data. Research published in 2019 highlights that “there have been no systematic efforts to determine how many social workers have a disability, and the National Association of Social Workers’ most recent workforce study of licensed social workers in the United States did not collect data on disability status” (Kiesel et al., 2019). As of 2023, this has not been addressed.

Barriers in Licensure. Issues regarding licensure reflect similar barriers to those in education, though there is little research on the topic. Similar to the absence of data mentioned above, no information could be located from the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) regarding disability related to examination pass rates, licensure or regulations. Additionally, their options for requesting accommodations for testing are strict and invasive, going so far as to require DSM or ICD codes directly from a medical professional (ASWB, 2023).

Experiences shared by NASW Members and employees also suggest barriers around in-person CEU requirements and that some State Boards of Social Work do not have procedures in place to provide accommodations for licensure, such as extended timeframes.

Lack of Representation. Based on a review of all 55 NASW Chapters websites, only four NASW Chapters (7.3%) have committees or groups focused on disability. An additional sixteen Chapters (29.1%) have a general Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee or group, many of which do not mention disability as a focus.

Models & Examples

Similar Models In Other Professional Associations

Multiple other professional organizations have Disability focused committees or similar councils. Examples from four are provided below.

- [Council on Social Work Education \(CSWE\) Council on Disability and Persons With Disabilities](#)

The CSWE Council develops disability related social work education resources, facilitates the full participation of people with disabilities in social work education, and advocates to include social, political, and economic matters related to disability in the framework of social work education.

The group facilitates an annual award that recognizes disability scholarship, and has developed disability focused curricular guidance and other resources (CSWE, n.d.).

- [American Bar Association Commission on Disability Rights](#)

The Bar Association’s Commission on Disability Rights has a robust program that promotes their “commitment to justice and the rule of law for people with mental, physical, and sensory disabilities, and to their full and equal participation in the legal profession”.

The group’s activities include awareness campaigns, a pledge for change, resources and toolkits, events, awards, continuing education credits, special initiatives, internships, webinars, workshops and member recognition (ABA, n.d.).

- [Canadian Association for Social Work Education \(CASWE-ACFTS\) \(dis\)Ability Caucus](#)

The CASWE-ACFTS Caucus focuses on curriculum and research in Canadian schools of social work along with access, inclusion and accommodations for disabled faculty, staff and students. Activities listed in the most recent annual report include multiple publications and presentations (CASWE-ACFTS, n.d.).

- [American Psychological Association The Committee on Disability Issues in Psychology](#)

The APA’s Committee promotes the psychological welfare of people with disabilities, the development and implementation of psychological service delivery models, awareness and the inclusion of knowledge about disabilities and disability issues.

The 2022 report from the APA’s Committee lists activities like presentations, comments

on other APA policies and activities, publications, recognitions, resolutions and guidelines creation/development, advocacy, and collaborative meetings (APA, n.d.).

Examples from NASW Chapters

Currently, **four NASW Chapters have Disability specific committees** or Special Interest Groups (SIGs). They are California, Massachusetts, New York City and Florida. These four Chapters represent between 17,000 - 35,000 NASW members (based on NASW (n.d.-b) Membership estimates). Examples from two Chapters are provided below.

- **NASW Massachusetts**

NASW-MA's group is titled Disability Justice Shared Interest Group. Their website indicates that their overall purpose is to “advocate for policies, actions and programming that advance the disability justice framework that has been developed by the disability community” in addition to 5 more specific program goals. An example of one of these 5 goals is below.

- *Goal 5: To value disabled social workers in the profession*
 - *Objective 6a: To eliminate ableist barriers to social work education for future social workers in both academic and field settings*
 - *Objective 6b: To value the lived experiences of disabled social workers in the profession*
 - *Objective 6c: To eliminate ableist barriers to social work employment for social workers*

They also have listed a legislative agenda as well as many text-based resources related to disability justice (Disability Justice Shared Interest Group, n.d.).

- **NASW California**

NASW-CA's group is titled NASW California Chapter Disabilities Council. Their group has a public Facebook page which identifies their mission as “To serve as a resource to address challenges and issues pertinent to both social workers living with a disability and/or vision/hearing loss and social workers who work with clients who have a disability and/or vision/hearing loss. The term “disability” is all inclusive; for example, it includes both visible and invisible disabilities” (Facebook - NASW California Chapter Disabilities Council, n.d.) and provides content related to upcoming events, information, news, articles and resources.

Their goals include providing networking events, mentorship, resources and CEUs, contributing to NASW News and holding ongoing council meetings.

It should be noted, that even within this small number of disability specific groups, there is information provided that is inconsistent with the preferences of many disabled people, such as one Chapter's promotion of person-first language without acknowledgement of identity-first language. This example highlights again the need for broader education and additional perspectives to be included.

Recommendations

Based on the information provided in this report, it is recommended that NASW create a National Committee on Disability as soon as possible. The following is a suggested framework, in line with the format of other NASW committees:

Authorization and Accountability

The National Committee on Disability is required by the NASW Bylaws (2023), Article XII, Section A. The Committee reports on a regular basis to the NASW Board of Directors on matters of policy and shall coordinate with the Program Coordinating Committee on activities related to the program.

Purpose

The National Committee on Disability develops, reviews and monitors programs of the Association that significantly affect disabled people and promote overall well-being.

Time Frame

The National Committee on Disability is an on-going Bylaws required committee.

Members, Terms and Criteria

The Committee shall be composed of six members, one of whom will be the Chair. Members serve for three years, one of whom will be the Board Secretary or another member of the NASW Board of Directors. The Chair is appointed for two years. The Committee requests that disabled members be represented.

Specific Responsibilities

1. Given that disability and well-being issues are core to all Association work, this committee shall develop, promote and/or collaborate on methods of ensuring inclusion of disability and well-being issues on NASW policies and programs.
2. To promote the development of knowledge, theory and practice as related to disability and well-being issues, especially in social work education, employment and the overall profession.
3. To review proposed Delegate Assembly public social policies for their impact on disabled people, and make recommendations for their acceptance or modification.
4. To monitor legislative changes, policy changes, and data affecting policy changes, with regard to disabled people.
5. To identify ways to eliminate ableist social work practices and policies and make recommendations to appropriate organizational units for action.

Recommendations for potential projects or areas of focus include:

- Establishing internships, scholarships and other supports for disabled social workers
- Identify more accurate prevalence of disabled students, faculty and employees in the social work profession and representation within NASW
- Collaboration with the Grand Challenges of Social Work initiative to include disability perspectives
- Create a campaign to educate social work employers on disability and accommodations
- Develop guidance for State Boards of Social Work regarding accommodation requests in licensure
- Support research and policies which advance universal design principles and web accessibility
- Develop an avenue for recognition of the advancement of disability issues in social work
- Advocate for awareness of the various models of disability and language preferences
- Identifying and eliminating barriers to licensure (for example, increased length of time allowed to obtain clinical hours toward LCSW) and employment impacting disabled social workers

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