

BOSTON
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ADVANCING LEADERSHIP

in Public Health Social Work Education

Recommendations for the Field

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MOVING PUBLIC HEALTH SOCIAL WORK FORWARD: *Recommendations for the Field*

One of the oldest forms of social work, public health social work dates to the early 20th century when social workers and public health officers collaborated on infectious disease control, maternal and child health promotion, and the settlement house movement (Popple & Leighninger, 2011; Ruth, Sisco & Marshall, 2016). From its outset, public health-informed social work was distinguished from other forms of social work by its willingness to investigate social factors as causes of poor health. Early public health social workers combined epidemiologically-informed casework, community-level interventions, and vigorous policy advocacy to bring about the major societal level changes that improved overall health (Bracht, 1978; Rice, 1959; Ruth & Marshall, 2017; Ruth, Sisco & Marshall, 2016). While social work's role in public health has evolved over the course of a century, the fundamentals of public health social work remain.

We are in a new era of social work education and practice. A new generation of mission-driven students and practitioners are seeking to address the root causes of social problems and illnesses; they want to learn to promote health equity, to address the social determinants of health, and help build a just society. Attracted to the values, ethics, and practice of social work, as well as the science, prevention, and pragmatism of public health, current students and many practitioners crave an integrated practice that enables them to work with people and populations. Public health social work, with its broader conception of health, is that practice. It is time to recognize its historic significance, value its current capabilities and contributions, and provide leadership for expanding its place in the larger professions of social work and public health. Much more action is needed if social work is to reconnect the bridge to public health. The profession, as a whole, will strengthen and grow when it understands that, despite its deep and varied practices, all social work is health social work.

OBJECTIVE

The *Public Health Social Work: Recommendations for the Field* document aims to advance a strategic vision and galvanize action for the expansion and promotion of PHSW. These recommendations can help facilitate increased commitment to integrating public health approaches into social work education. In turn, this will prepare more students for work in public health, strengthen social work's ability to partner interprofessionally, and help the profession achieve its goal of contributing to improvement in the nation's health.

PROCESS

In March 2018, the ALPS leadership team identified a group of PHSW leaders, practitioners and educators for participation in a PHSW Recommendations Working Group. The group, comprised of leaders in the field who are motivated to advance PHSW education, represented a diversity of backgrounds, expertise, practice areas, and geographic regions.

In early June 2018, the group convened via video conference to meet, discuss the goals of the working group, and to prepare for the in-person retreat. The group members also prepared by reading articles on PHSW and completing a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis (SWOT) of PHSW.

On June 21, 2018, the group of 20 convened for a one-day retreat at Boston University. Through facilitated small and large group discussions, the group members reflected upon the SWOT analysis and discussed strategies for advancing PHSW. Discussions centered on the following themes:

1. **Conceptualizing, Refining, Promoting Discipline of PHSW**
2. **Building Educational Capacity at All Levels**
3. **PHSW Practice Enhancement and Support**
4. **Cultivating PHSW Leadership**
5. **Funding PHSW Education, Practice and Research**
6. **Promoting and Improving MSW/MPH Programs**

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC HEALTH SOCIAL WORK: *Recommendations for Progress*

1

Develop a PHSW leadership cadre.

Many of the identified recommendations necessitate organized effort and leadership from those committed to PHSW education and practice. At this time, there are a small number of dedicated public health social work organizations, and almost all are led by volunteers.

RECOMMENDATION

A cross-organizational group of committed individuals must be formed to develop a public health social work leadership cadre. The primary purpose of this group will be the collaborative promotion of public health social work for a new era, aimed at sustaining and enhancing its practice and education. The Boston University Center for Innovation in Social Work and Health is prepared to convene individuals to move this recommendation forward over the next year.

CURRENT ORGANIZATIONS ADVANCING PHSW LEADERSHIP:

- American Public Health Association's Public Health Social Work Section
- Association of State and Territorial Public Health Social Workers
- Group for Public Health Social Work Initiatives (affiliated with Boston University)
- Directors of MSW/MPH programs
- HRSA Advancing Leadership in Public Health Social Work Education grantees

2

Define PHSW for a new era.

Revise the definition and broaden the conceptualization of PHSW for contemporary practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Update the definition of PHSW as an impact-oriented, unifying framework for health social work, inclusive of clinical, macro, policy, and advocacy approaches.
- Link PHSW to contemporary health system drivers, including integrated behavioral health, value-based payment, health impact, social determinants of health, health inequities, and both prevention and intervention opportunities as they relate to health and social issues (e.g. violence, disasters, substance use disorders, criminal justice involvement).
- Articulate the value of PHSW in framing racism, sexism, inequality, and other forms of oppression that cause and exacerbate the social determinants of health.
- Demonstrate and document the unique role and need for PHSW in social work education, practice, and the workplace.
- Update existing PHSW standards and competencies and work with educators to link course work and field placements to competencies.



3

Create a PHSW communications and marketing strategy.

Develop a unified communications and marketing effort that is widely accessible to researchers, educators, practitioners, and the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Produce and disseminate a brief “PHSW elevator speech” that colleagues and students can use to tell the story of PHSW. This can be incorporated into professional workplace settings, educational programs, applications for funding, or in conversations with potential allies to PHSW.
- Create a sustainable, easy-to-update online hub for PHSW that can affirm and strengthen PHSW practice. This “one stop shop” can house resources, educational materials, curricula, marketing materials, and can serve as a point of virtual connection for practitioners who are “doing PHSW.” Content on this PHSW hub will elevate PHSW voices through outreach, collaborations, blogging, podcasts, learning communities, mentoring programs, webinars, list-serves, and the facilitation of interdisciplinary partnerships, in-person summits, and annual conferences.
- Develop low-cost core messaging and marketing tools that can connect geographically and professionally dispersed colleagues; promote engagement and idea sharing; and attract new practitioners, allies, and students to the field.
- Target research to “reverse the microphone,” enabling the voices of PHSW to reach the academy and major social work and public health organizations.
- Conduct and disseminate research on PHSW through peer-reviewed special issues, supplements, and commentary pieces.

4

Facilitate professional organizational support of PHSW education and practice.

Guide professional organizations efforts in advancing PHSW.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create PHSW tracks or “special calls” at annual conferences to highlight practice, education, and related research.
- Utilize organizational websites for PHSW feature stories (e.g., “about PHSW” section).

EXAMPLES OF WAYS PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS CAN ADVANCE PHSW:

- Add PHSW as a “specialty practice area” within National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and develop a PHSW interest group at Society for Social Work Research
- Support the Association of Schools and Programs in Public Health (ASPPH) in strengthening MSW/MPH programs and providing information regarding public health social work.



5

Enable educators and institutions to advance PHSW education and research.

Educators and institutions can advance PHSW education and research. Provide support to deans, faculty, alumni, MSW/MPH program and continuing education directors, to influence them to advance PHSW education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand the integration of PHSW history and practice into social work education (including certificates and specializations). Faculty can use BU-ALPS tools, such as the PHSW Toolkit and the MSW/MPH Handbook, to initiate conversations about the importance of PHSW and to provide concrete ideas for why and how to include PHSW in social work education at every level.
- Prioritize PHSW faculty development through training institutes, learning circles, and online modules to strengthen confidence and broaden interest in teaching PHSW.
- Identify and engage major initiatives within the professions of social work and public health where PHSW can make an important contribution, for example, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare’s Grand Challenges.
- Create new or update existing courses in PHSW and enhance course syllabi to include content on PHSW; generate course content and case studies that illustrate PHSW approaches and leadership in various critical and contemporary issue areas (i.e., emergency disaster response, violence, incarceration, and the opioid epidemic).

Faculty are welcome to contribute their materials to the BU-ALPS team to add to the Toolkit.

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- Enlist PHSW practitioners, particularly MSW/MPH alumni, as field educators.
- “Write in” roles for PHSW practitioners and students into grant applications.
- Work with CSWE to update practice standards to more substantively include PHSW and associated practices into the EPAS standards.
- Create PHSW in-person and online professional development content, such as post-graduate certificate programs and institutes for practice-based professionals, field educators and supervisors, and faculty.
- Support MSW/MPH program directors and faculty in elevating the value of MSW/MPH programs to the profession.

6

Advance PHSW-related research.

Support deans, faculty, researchers, doctoral and masters’ students, and social work practitioners in conducting PHSW-related research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct outreach to funders and request that PHSW be integrated into requirements for RFPs, cooperative agreements, and other grant announcements. Use “elevator speech” (see Recommendation #3) as a conversation starter.
- Approach funders about conducting a PHSW workforce study; profiles of MSW/MPH and PHSW practitioners; and/or other efforts to illustrate “PHSW in action”. Funders can often see across projects and initiatives in a way that those on the ground cannot, and funders can be instrumental in creating cross-initiative and interdisciplinary collaborations once they know that PHSW exists and what it does.
- Create and regularly update a list of PHSW-friendly leaders in federal, state, and local government, as well as in major foundations and NGOs. Invite individuals on this list to conference presentations, summits, webinars, and training opportunities.
- Educate for inclusion of PHSW into grants. When writing grant applications in response to broad calls in behavioral health, suicide prevention, or other areas where prevention and intervention intersect, researchers can “write in” opportunities for PHSWs, including nationwide training and technical assistance activities to support integration and replication efforts that feature PHSW.



The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), the funder of the BU ALPS initiative, has galvanized and sustained interest in and support for PHSW education and workforce training. The PHSW community can continue to support HRSA’s efforts and make the case for the value of continued funding for PHSW.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The PHSW: Recommendations to the Field will be shared with all schools of social work and public health, directors of MSW/ MPH Programs, and various stakeholder organizations such as the Council on Social Work Education, the Association of Schools and Programs in Public Health, the American Public Health Association's Public Health Social Work section and the newly-reorganized Association of State and Territorial Public Health Social Workers for ongoing use as a guiding document. The recommendations will also be maintained on the Boston University Center for Innovation in Social Work & Health website. During 2019, the Center will work with BU-ALPS core team members and other PHSW-oriented organizations, to convene a meeting dedicated to building a PHSW leadership cadre. This leadership effort, together with a mechanism for communications, appear to be the key ingredients for a successful advocacy initiative on behalf of PHSW.



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