

SOCIAL WORKERS REGISTRATION BOARD

Guidelines for Social Work Supervision

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In 2005, the Social Workers Registration Board conducted a large-scale survey of the practice of supervision among all social workers in Hong Kong. Afterwards, a discussion paper was sent to every registered social work (RSW) for input. During the consultation process, various social work organizations (e.g., Hong Kong Council of Social Services, Hong Kong Social Workers Association, Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union, and staff associations), training institutes, and agency heads were also asked to share their views. One of the recommendations proposed as a result of the consultation was to formulate a set of guidelines for the practice of supervision in Hong Kong.
- 1.2 The Taskforce on Supervision Guidelines under the Working Group on Professional Development was formed in May 2007. A review of the practice of supervision in 14 human service organizations was conducted. The guidelines adopted by social work organizations in other countries were also examined. It was found that the supervision guidelines established by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) were the most comprehensive among developed countries. Adapting the AASW's supervision guidelines to the context of social work in Hong Kong, the Taskforce drafted this document.
- 1.3 The aim of this document is to develop a set of recommended basic standards for practice in the social work field. It clarifies the responsibility of agencies, workers, and supervisors with regard to professional supervision. Agencies and workers are encouraged to try their utmost to meet, and even exceed, the proposed standards.
- 1.4 Supervision is one of the core elements in the development and maintenance of high standards of social work practice. Supervision is important to the quality of human service delivery and the professional development of frontline social work practitioners. The primary objective of professional supervision is to enable, ensure, and enhance humanistic, competent, and independent social work practice. Ultimately, supervision should benefit service users.
- 1.5 The term "supervision" has a specific meaning in the social work field. It encompasses much more than "line management," which refers primarily to the monitoring of job performance and the efficiency of service programmes.

- 1.6 “Supervision” also encompasses more than “consultation.” Supervision takes into account hierarchical administrative responsibility, which is an integral part of social work practice in the organizational context of a social service agency.
- 1.7 Supervision is most effective when it is valued by agencies, supervisors, and supervisees, when these parties consider supervision a high priority, and when the importance of supervision to the quality of service and the needs of the supervisee as a professional practitioner is recognized.
- 1.8 Social work supervision involves administrative, educational, and supportive functions. These three functions are interrelated and should be fulfilled by agencies, but the proportion of time and effort demanded by each function may be based on the service context and needs of the staff.

1.8.1 Administrative Function

This is a management function that includes the setting of service objectives and priorities, clarification of roles, planning and assignment of work, review and evaluation of work, and accountability and responsibility for the supervisee’s work.

1.8.2 Educational Function

This involves the inculcation of professional values, provision of knowledge, and training in practice skills — the tools a social worker must have for effective professional practice. It also includes the encouragement of self-awareness and sensitivity on the part of social workers. The educational function is a core component of the professional supervision of social workers.

1.8.3 Supportive Function

This enables the supervisee to deal with job-related issues, and to develop the attitudes and feelings conducive to effective job performance. It sustains staff morale and gives supervisees a sense of professional self worth, and a feeling of belonging, both in their agencies and in the profession.

2 ORGANIZATIONAL STANDARDS

- 2.1 To provide effective services to clients within the context of a human service agency, supervision should meet the needs of the supervisee, the supervisor, and the agency.

2.1.1 Rationale

Supervision should serve administrative, educational, and supportive functions unless there is a valid reason for its scope to be more limited.

2.1.2 Operation

It is advisable for a human service agency to develop a written supervision agreement that includes long-term professional development objectives and that is mutually negotiated and periodically reviewed. A reporting form for supervision sessions or practice-related records appropriate to the service setting of the agency should also be developed. While the criteria for assessing supervision will differ from agency to agency, the following simple guidelines are provided for reference and as a checklist:

- a. Both the supervisor and the supervisee are well prepared for the supervision sessions.
- b. The supervisee's workload is monitored by the supervisor regularly.
- c. The supervisee's practice-related records are reviewed by the supervisor regularly.
- d. The process of professional intervention is discussed in the supervision sessions.
- e. Professional advice on service delivery is provided by the supervisor.
- f. The client outcomes are reviewed and discussed.
- g. There is evaluation of service effectiveness and efficiency as a means of providing accountability to the service agency and the community.
- h. The ethical and legal issues implied in direct practice are considered.
- i. There is discussion on working relationships with other colleagues within the agency.
- j. There are opportunities for the supervisee to give feedback to the supervisor.

- k. Issues related to the supervisee's roles, professional identity, and morale are discussed.
- l. The supervisee's long-term professional development needs are addressed in supervision sessions.
- m. There is a supportive learning atmosphere for both the supervisor and the supervisee.

2.2 The duties of social work supervisors in terms of time allocation, accountability, and lines of authority should be formally recognized by the agency. The duty list should also be periodically reviewed and assessed to determine the feasibility of the workload.

2.2.1 Rationale

Accountability, authority and adequate resources should be available to support the practice of effective supervision.

2.2.2 Operation

- a. The percentage of work hours required for the supervision of each supervisee should be calculated (including time for preparation and evaluation), and the other responsibilities of the supervisor should be adjusted accordingly. The minimum level of individual supervision should be one uninterrupted hour every two months. Exceptions should only be allowed for a compelling reason.
- b. The time spent in supervision sessions is subject to the following conditions:
 - i. It promotes professional growth.
 - ii. It is scheduled and the participants are prepared and goal-oriented.
 - iii. It is one-to-one.
 - iv. It encourages and monitors progress.
 - v. It is conducted regularly and systematically (reasons for missed sessions should be recorded).

2.3 Agencies should provide opportunities for the further development of supervisors' knowledge and skills in supervisory practice.

2.3.1 Rationale

The quality of supervision is dependent on the supervisory capacity and practice expertise of supervisors.

2.3.2 Operation

Agencies should enable supervisors to attend courses, seminars, conferences, etc., relating to supervision, and the financial resources for such activities should be included in the budget for staff development.

- 2.4 Agencies should develop an appropriate mechanism to assess problematic supervisor-supervisee relationships and negotiate solutions.

2.4.1 Rationale

Supervision cannot be implemented effectively unless there is a trustful and positive working relationship.

2.4.2 Operation

Procedures for dealing with potential conflicts that cannot be directly resolved between supervisors and supervisees should be developed, and they should be specified in the supervision agreement. Conflicts can be resolved by various means. For example, the first step could be peer mediation. If such mediation fails, the superiors of the supervisors may be required to mediate and identify possible structural sources of the conflict, which are being expressed in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. If all intermediary measures fail, arbitration conducted by the top management of the agency may be necessary.

3 SUPERVISOR STANDARDS

- 3.1 It is recommended that supervisors should possess at least five years of practice experience preferably in a relevant field (but not necessarily in the particular sub-field).

(Note: In this context, the term “field” refers to a broad client population and service system, such as “youth services.” Specialized ‘sub-fields’ are the specific areas that constitute the broad field, such as “youth outreach services”. It should be recognized that where supervisors do not have relevant experience, they will require professional support in carrying out their supervisory duties.)

3.2 It is encouraged that supervisors successfully complete a course in social work supervision.

3.3 It is encouraged that supervisors undergo further training in a field of practice or a method of intervention relevant to the service.

3.3.1 Rationale

Supervisors should have more practice experience than their supervisees and have some training in supervision. It is unlikely that a person would be able to acquire an integrated understanding of social work theory and practice without basic working experience.

4 MINIMUM SUPERVISION STANDARDS ACCORDING TO LEVEL OF EXPERIENCE

4.1 Recent graduates (with less than three years of full-time experience) should receive at least one uninterrupted hour of individual face-to-face supervision every month. The form of the supervision may vary according to the characteristics of the agency and the practice situation. Group supervision is also encouraged as a supplement. Staff meetings, team meetings, in-service training sessions, workshops and seminars, while valuable sources of professional development, are not acceptable substitutes for supervision.

4.1.1 Rationale

Recent graduates have an especially strong need for supervision in order to consolidate the knowledge and skills acquired during their studies, to successfully manage the stress that accompanies their new responsibilities, and to be adequately prepared to become supervisors themselves.

4.1.2 Operation

Supervision programmes for recent graduates need to be tailored to the specific practice context.

4.2 Social workers with three or more years of full-time experience should have the equivalent of one uninterrupted hour of supervision in every two months. If supervision is conducted by a peer (a colleague of the same rank), the responsibility for accountability and review should be assumed by someone in a senior position.

4.2.1 Rationale

- a. Experienced social workers need, and have a right to expect, an opportunity to use their colleagues as a “sounding board” for consultation and reflection upon their own practice.
- b. On occasions, it may be appropriate for experienced social workers to consult experts in other professions or disciplines to further their own professional development goals.
- c. To ensure that peer supervision is effective, it is necessary for both parties to be sufficiently experienced to know their own limitations, as well as their strengths.

5 ALTERNATIVES IN THE ABSENCE OF HUMAN RESOURCES

5.1 In situations where these standards of supervision cannot be met within an agency, the agency should provide equivalent supervision or consultation opportunities. These may include

- a. hiring qualified supervisors from other service units on a part-time basis;
- b. hiring qualified supervisors from other agencies;
- c. employing social work consultants on a part-time basis to provide educational and supportive supervision (administrative supervision would remain the responsibility of management); and
- d. providing funding for private consultation outside the agency (the funding should include, at minimum, compensation for travelling time and attendance). In cases where the person providing consultation is paid by the agency, issues of accountability, confidentiality, and other possible ethical dilemmas should be anticipated and should be clear to all three parties (the agency, the consultant, and the social worker).

6 Schedule of Implementation and the Way Forward

A roadmap is attached to these Supervision Guidelines to help agencies and social workers gain a clearer picture of the Board’s schedule and the direction in implementing the Guidelines. The Board will conduct periodic reviews of the Guidelines. Feedback from the field on the content of the Guidelines and related issues are welcome at all times.

Road Map of Promotion and Implementation of Supervision Guidelines

