



Social Work Must be Included in the Department of Education Definition of Professional Degree

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I am a social worker and a social work educator, with more than a decade of direct practice experience with older adults and their families in hospitals and nursing homes, and more than a decade of work with undergraduate social work students, many of whom go on to pursue master's degrees in Social Work.

I am writing to express significant concern with The U.S. Department of Education's proposed rule that would have the effect of removing social work from the designation of professional degree. This would severely limit students' access to Master's Level Social Work programs, as many would no longer be able to use federal Direct Unsubsidized Loans and other critical funding to pay for their education.

This change would create significant financial barriers for students to access the degree, leading to significant disparities in who is able to access this important training, resulting in fewer social work graduates. Fewer social workers will exacerbate the existing shortage of mental health professionals in the United States.

According to the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis (2023), more than half of the U.S. population lives in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area, a problem that is far more significant in rural counties, where residents are more likely to receive mental health services from primary care providers not specifically trained in addressing mental health needs. They emphasize that these shortages are occurring while the U.S. is facing a behavioral health crisis, with increasing rates of depression, overdoses, and suicide, especially over the last five years.

Social workers also provide essential services in child welfare, education, aging services, and community services, sectors already facing severe workforce shortages. Aging services are facing increasing demands because of a growth in the population of older adults and the need for more complex services.

Social workers provide essential services to veterans who access care through the Veteran's Administration (VA). The VA is the single largest employer of Master's prepared social workers in the nation, and the VA trains more graduate students than any other social service or health care agency. Social workers help veterans navigate the complex VA system and help veterans bring together treatment plans that involve a combination VA and community services.

To reiterate my request, it is essential that social work be included in the Department of Education definition of professional degree.