

SOCIAL WORK IN ACTION

Collaborative Regional Workforce Development for Hawai'i and the Pacific: 85+ Years of Social Work Education

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Social Work in Action is a solicited column from the social work community in Hawai'i. It is edited by HJHSW Contributing Editor Sophia Lau PhD, of the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Abbreviations

BSW = Bachelor of Social Work

CEPD = Continuing and Professional Education

DSW = Department of Social Work

MSW = Master of Social Work

UH Mānoa = University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

The purpose of land grant institutions of higher education is “to engage with communities to solve problems and improve the quality of life for its citizenry.”¹ The Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health’s Department of Social Work (DSW) has been engaged in that mission for over 85 years, serving local, regional, and global communities to solve increasingly complex social problems and their intersection with social determinants of health. Similar to the purpose of land grant institutions, the roots of social work are in serving a community’s most marginalized and vulnerable members. The Thompson School has prepared social workers to go into health-related fields, such as trauma work at hospitals, hospice care, health education and prevention efforts. However, social work is much broader than biological health alone, serving as the nation’s top provider of substance use treatments, providing family support and clinical therapy, addressing poverty and other systemic issues, while also writing and advocating for policies, and standing on the front lines of community advocacy. Social workers are everywhere there are people in need, and schools of social work train graduates at the bachelor, master and doctorate levels to be prepared for a wide variety of possible job roles.

The social work labor force throughout the Pacific is currently facing a shortage, with the need for more social workers projected to grow substantially.² For example, rural areas of Hawai'i are considered “medically underserved,” including a lack of social workers. In addition, US-affiliated entities throughout the Pacific are plagued by chronic and severe shortages in the health professions. There is a particular shortage of substance use and mental health providers in these regions where the social work professional need is projected to grow over 20% in the next 10 years.² The University of Hawai'i (UH) at Mānoa Thompson

School DSW trains a culturally-grounded workforce in their home communities through innovative outreach in online based distance education and traditional campus-based modalities, and by engaging community partners across the region to identify and address workforce needs. The DSW is deeply invested in collaborations to improve the health and well-being of Hawai'i, the Pacific region and beyond and produces research that has local, national, and global reach.

Innovative Programs

UH Mānoa’s commitment to social work education has resulted in significant contributions to the well-being of the state of Hawai'i, the Pacific region and the social service workforce. In 1936 the School of Social Work focused exclusively on social work education, in 2016 the school merged with Public Health and the Center on Aging, and in 2021 changed the name to the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health.

From 1988 until 2007 the DSW addressed regional labor force concerns by launching a “traveling option” of the Master of Social Work (MSW) program and in 2007 the traveling program was converted to an online program that graduates 30-40 students a year. Additionally, in 2010 the DSW launched a partnership with the University of Guam to facilitate the matriculation of their accredited Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students to the DSW online MSW program. Due in part to the expansion of the distance program, the MSW program is now the largest graduate program at UH Mānoa with over 200 MSW students per year.

Since its inception in 1976, the BSW program has worked to ensure a smooth transition for those who attend community colleges to find a home in social work at Mānoa, while filling critical workforce needs in the region. In furtherance of their goals to address labor force shortages at the BSW level, an innovative online, asynchronous BSW program was launched in 2018. The program is the first at UH Mānoa to offer the asynchronous 5-week class option which is of high value to students who may be unable to access traditional UH Mānoa based, in-person courses. This option has now graduated over

100 BSWs across the Hawaiian islands, leading to an important increase in the number of social workers trained to serve workforce needs in case management, education, family coaching, and other support positions.

More recently, the DSW has developed its Continuing Education and Professional Development (CEPD) program to continue the advancement of the profession and the development of the workforce in the region. Through delivery in person and in virtual spaces, with a number of contracts with state and private agencies, the DSW is delivering high quality workforce development. In many cases, CEPD fulfills training needs to assist the workforce in maintaining their licensure and in attaining professional certifications. CEPD also responds to emerging workforce needs, such as promoting training during the COVID-19 pandemic to support a social service and health infrastructure that was shifting to adapt to the constraints and threats of the pandemic. Thus, the DSW not only contributes to producing new workers, but in sustaining and training professionals for increasingly higher levels of practice.

The DSW continues its commitment to grow its student body to ensure strong representation of all communities. Research has consistently shown that minoritized communities are underrepresented among health, behavioral health, and social service trainees.³ However, the DSW has one of the most diverse faculty and student bodies at UH Mānoa, reflecting the people and cultures of the state of Hawai‘i, the Pacific region and beyond. Since its initial accreditation over 85+ years ago, the school has trained 5000+ students, the majority of whom stay and work in the state of Hawai‘i and the region. Thus, not only does the DSW produce consistent numbers of professionals, but the DSW contributes to the advancement of some of the most marginalized members of communities. The department’s work engaging high school students, early college students and those already working in the social service field is rooted in identifying pathways to further professionalization of the field of social work for all peoples in the region.

Innovations in Research

While the results of the DSW’s educational programs may be the most visible activities for addressing workforce shortages and health, mental health, and social service innovations, the DSW has contributed significant research that advances the profession as well. For over 80 years, social work faculty have produced ground-breaking research that has addressed a variety of local, national, and international social issues. Initially, social work faculty focused on local research sorely needed in the community, including topics such as juvenile justice, housing, social work with Pacific Islanders, and the social conditions of different racial/ethnic groups across the state. The 1960s saw the faculty focus on civil rights, diversity, and advocacy-related research, while the 1970s focused on research and reform related to the Hawaiian Renaissance, and the integration of Hawaiian

knowledge into social work practice. Later cohorts of faculty have produced some of the most innovative research on human sexuality, on the importance of evidence-based practice in social interventions, international social welfare interventions and social service delivery; social work with Hawaiians; and the then emerging field of gerontology.

Currently, the social work faculty examine a wide variety of topics that serve the local community, but also contribute to social change and knowledge creation at the national and international levels. The faculty study topics in: interprofessional education; technology in practice and education; addiction/behavioral health policies; Indigenous health and social work practice; child welfare; social and adjustment issues of Pacific Islander youths; social welfare policy; health care access and service utilization; mental health literacy; international social work; productive aging; immigrant and refugee rights; and prejudice, stereotypes, and hate crimes, among others. The faculty’s research informs local policies and programs, and has contributed to national debates before influential bodies such as the US Supreme Court and the US Commission on Civil Rights.

More specific to current workforce needs, the DSW has produced a number of research studies that examine social work workforce issues in the state of Hawai‘i, including pathways to licensure attainment among social work graduates in the state,⁴ licensure attainment among MSW students from campus-based or distance options in Hawai‘i,⁵ empowering the workforce through resilience training,⁶ and examinations of ongoing monitoring and definitional issues for the social work profession in the state,² among others. Thus, the research produced by faculty of the DSW directly impacts the understanding of workforce needs in the state and region, that in turn informs the DSW’s educational endeavors to develop a highly trained workforce.

Innovations Through Collaborations

With field internship partners at over 150 sites in Hawai‘i, Guam, and beyond, social work is deeply rooted in communities and associated organizations. Field instructors, frequently UH Mānoa alumni, provide supervision to, and assist students in internship settings where students become contributors to our workforce. In fact, current estimates suggest that while DSW students do require an educational environment in their field sites rather than being treated as employees, they still contribute over \$1 000 000 in services each year across the Pacific while they are students. While a significant number of field sites are in the City and County of Honolulu, almost half are on neighboring islands, with a significant number in Guam, and international opportunities for field settings are also located in Korea, Japan, and the Philippines.

In addition to field sites, the DSW has a strong history of partnering across disciplines and with community and state organizations to develop and launch programs. These innova-

tive collaborations emphasize the DSWs commitment to interdisciplinary work to grow the knowledge base of social work connected research and service delivery. Selected examples of such collaborations are:

- Hawai‘i Interprofessional Team Collaboration Simulation (HIPTCS)
- Hawai‘i Interprofessional Education (HIPE) program
- Hawai‘i Child Welfare Education Collaboration (HCWEC); with the Department of Human Services, Child Welfare Services
- Hawai‘i Substance Use Professional Development (SUPD); with the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division of the Department of Health
- Native Hawaiian Interdisciplinary Health: BSW and the Native Hawaiian Center of Excellence at the John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM)
- KeA‘o Mau, interdisciplinary program with Public Health, supported by external community partner
- Micronesians Advancing in Health Professions, collaboration with JABSOM
- Hā Kūpuna, the National Resource Center for Native Hawaiian Elders

These collaborations offer specific innovations in training the workforce, translating new knowledge to existing professionals, and advancing the research impacts on the workforce throughout the region. These contracts and collaborations are the heart of a land grant school’s mission to serve the local community.

Conclusion

The vision of the Thompson School’s namesake to create connected Pacific communities drives the DSW to continue work in the community as part of its genealogy, its mission as a land grant institution, and its expression of social work values. The DSW has consistently prioritized listening to communities as they define the parameters of how to enhance their health and well-being, while prioritizing the preservation and integration of generations of traditional knowledge into social work education as a part of high quality service delivery in the Pacific. As the DSW further develops relationships with Pacific partners, we know that at the intersection of academic expertise and community-based practice is the deeply rooted wisdom that solutions to today’s problems are available through maintaining connection to traditional cultural solutions.

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