

Entry-Level Competency Profile for the Social Work Profession in Canada

The Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators

Executive Summary



Acknowledgements:

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The Project would not have been possible without the guidance of the members of the CCSWR, the ten Canadian social work Regulatory Authorities¹ and the participation of their members in the competency survey....the registered social workers in Canada.

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Introduction and Background

Professional regulation arises from the authority of the state to enact laws that are necessary to protect citizens from persons who are unqualified, incompetent or unfit to practice. In Canada, provincial and territorial governments have introduced legislation that, in part seeks to ensure that those who practice possess sufficient knowledge, skill and ability and can provide services in an ethical manner. The responsibility to enact legislation governing the regulation of the social work profession lies with the provinces and territories. In fact, with some exceptions practitioners cannot refer to themselves as “social workers” until they are registered in the province or territory in which they wish to practice. In some provinces, practitioners are not allowed to practice without obtaining a registration. At present, the provincial requirements for registered social workers, the definition of key practice competencies, and the standards by which competence is judged differ from province to province.

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (2009) identifies further benefits of regulation, suggesting that this approach:

- Establishes accepted standards of practice and ethics ;
- Increases accountability of the profession;
- Improves quality preparation of social work practitioners;
- Provides assurance to employers seeking to hire competent professionals;
- Describes the elements of practice that consumers should expect from a regulated social workers; and
- Guides educational and training programs and professional development.

In 1994, the Government of Canada and the provinces and territories signed the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT). By doing so the parties agreed to work toward implementing the goals outlined in Chapter 7 of the agreement that address labour mobility by removing barriers that prevented professionals from practising beyond the jurisdictions in which they were originally registered. Articulation of a common set of standards is a central feature through which social work regulators can reconcile differences in credentials and registration requirements while keeping first and foremost their public interest mandate. The identification and validation of standard competencies enables regulatory bodies to develop initiatives to enhance fair registration processes on the basis of credential and competency assessment. Competencies may also be used to identify the need for additional training, experience, or supervised practice to meet the requirements for full registration. Competencies, which entail knowledge, skills and abilities, may assist those with the authority to accredit educational programs, delineate reference points for admission to the profession, and as a basis for other competency and/or supervised practice evaluation tools.

Purpose of the Profile

The Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators engaged the assistance of *Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group* to develop a common profile of entry-level competencies for the social work profession in Canada. The development of the competency framework is intended to facilitate the mobility of registered professionals from one jurisdiction to another without diminishing the standards that they must meet, thereby assuring the Canadian public that a registered professional has the competencies required to engage in safe and effective practice.

The resulting Social Work Entry-Level Competency Profile (hereinafter referred to as the *Profile*) describes the core professional competencies that beginning social workers across Canada require regardless of the context in which they are employed. The Profile identifies minimum requirements for entry to the profession. It is not an exhaustive compendium of social work knowledge and practice. Provincial competency profiles, which reflect the specific legislative and regulatory framework of the practice of the profession and provincial entry-level competencies, take precedence over this document.

The Profile can be used by various stakeholder groups:

- The Profile provides **regulators** with a clear definition of key practice competencies that can be used to evaluate practitioners' readiness for safe practice and a set of clear criteria that they can use to evaluate the competence of social work practitioners.
- The Profile assures the **public** that registered social work practitioners are able to provide safe, competent and ethical services.
- The Profile assists **employers** by providing baseline criteria for role or position statements and assessing the utilization of social work professionals.
- The Profile can be used by **social work professionals** interested in working in Canada to evaluate credential and practice competencies to determine if they meet the registration requirements.
- The Profile can be used by social work **educators** by providing information about the minimum competencies that beginning social workers are required to possess.

The Profile is not intended to describe all possible competencies required by social workers nor should it be viewed as a "final" list of competencies. The Profile should be revised on a regular basis to reflect changes in social work.

Development of the Profile

The Profile was developed by the *Directions'* research team through the completion of a three stage project with ongoing input from the CCSWR Steering Committee and the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators.

During the first stages of this project, *Directions'* research team reviewed over 60 standards of practice, codes of ethics and other relevant documents produced by provincial, pan-Canadian, and international organizations and compiled a draft list of competencies. Two documents were specifically highlighted by the CCSWR: *Master List of Tasks* framework developed by the Association of Social Work Boards and the 2006 *Core Competencies of Social Workers* developed by the *Comité de la formation* (Committee on Training) de l'Ordre professionnel des travailleurs sociaux du Québec (OPTSQ). These were used as a basis for the current Profile, because the documents identified an extensive list of competencies and used common language shared across the social work field. Upon completion of the draft list of competencies, the list was reviewed and approved by the CCSWR Steering Committee.

Directions then invited practicing social workers, educators and registrars/associations to review the draft competencies and provide feedback. The results were summarized by *Directions*, reviewed by the Steering Committee, and subsequently reviewed by all the members of the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators. Some redundancies were eliminated and an additional 60 competencies were developed to more fully represent various dimensions of social work practice.

Upon completion of the revisions the resulting list of competencies was posted online in the form of a survey. All registered social workers across Canada were invited by the provincial regulatory bodies to identify the key entry-to-practice professional competencies that social workers must possess when they begin practice. Practitioners' feedback was analyzed and presented to the Steering Committee and the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators. Upon completion of the review, the final draft of the Profile was developed.

Assumptions

The development of the entry-level competencies for the social work profession was based upon a number of assumptions about the purpose of the project, social work practice and the process of competency development. These assumptions are presented below:

- The development of the competency profile arises from the necessity that all professions in Canada comply with the requirements of the Agreement on Internal

Trade that will facilitate mobility of professionals from one jurisdiction to another without diminishing the standards for registration.

- The competency framework is the public's assurance that a practitioner is qualified to practice.
- While in some provinces some social work practitioners are not registered with the provincial social work regulatory bodies, it was the decision of the CCSWR that such individuals not be included in the project because identifying and recruiting such practitioners would be difficult and costly and their practice would be adequately addressed by those registered with regulatory bodies.
- While acknowledging diversity of the social work practice, this Profile identifies core professional competencies that beginning social workers require regardless of the context in which they are employed.
- The primary focus of the profile developed here is on the measureable entry-level, profession-specific competencies that a person should be able to demonstrate in order to receive registration.

Definition and Context of Social Work Practice

The Canadian Association of Social Workers described social work as a profession “concerned with helping individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance their individual and collective well-being” (CASW, 2009, p. 2). Social workers provide social services to a broad range of clients specifically focusing on “their social development and the improvement or restoration of their social functioning, in particular by psychosocial evaluations and social intervention, by means of an approach focused in the interactions with the environment” (Ordre professionnel des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec, 2005, p. 8).

Social work is a “helping” profession that assists families, communities, or individuals to improve their social functioning capacity. Most of the definitions of the social work profession emphasize the importance of the relationship-centered, ecological focus. Social workers examine “the relationships between individuals, their natural support resources, the formal structures in their communities, and the societal norms and expectations that shape these relationships” (CASW, 2008, p. 1). Using a broad range of strategies and activities, social workers assist individuals, families, groups, and communities with developing their skills and their ability to use various resources in order to resolve individual, personal problems as well as address broader social issues such as social injustice, discrimination, poverty, unemployment, and domestic violence (CASW, 2009).

Social work practice is diverse. The requirements that social workers face typically differ from sector to sector and from organization to organization. Competencies that social workers will use are based on the context and situation in which the social worker practices. Social workers employed in rural and urban areas might also be required to perform tasks of different complexity with or without supervision. Some of the competencies will not be applicable to all contexts and situations. Thus, the goal of the Profile is to identify common core professional competencies that beginning social workers require regardless of the context in which they are employed.

Working Definitions

Entry-level social worker is defined as a person who is just entering the profession.

Entry-level profession-specific competencies are defined as the competencies that are essential for safe and ethical practice. These competencies determine the minimum knowledge, skill and abilities that a social worker must possess on the first day of professional practice regardless of their prior educational or professional preparation.

Clients are defined broadly in this competency profile. Social workers work with a variety of clients including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. In this document, the term client is used to refer to all these groups. The Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW, 2008, p. 39), defines ‘client’ as “any person or body that is the recipient of, or has contracted to receive, social work or social service work services from the member, including an individual, couple, group, family, organization, government agency or community that receives (or contracts to receive) direct or indirect social work or social service work services”.

Competency Profile: Conceptual Framework

Competencies that any professional need to possess can be organized in the following “pyramid of competency” (see Figure 1):

- **Personal competencies:** personal values and attitudes such as empathy, integrity, and respect for persons required for all types of work across fields of practice.
- **General competencies:** generic skills required for all types of work across fields of practice.
- **Entry-level profession-specific competencies:** minimal essential profession-specific competences that professionals must possess upon entering on the first day of

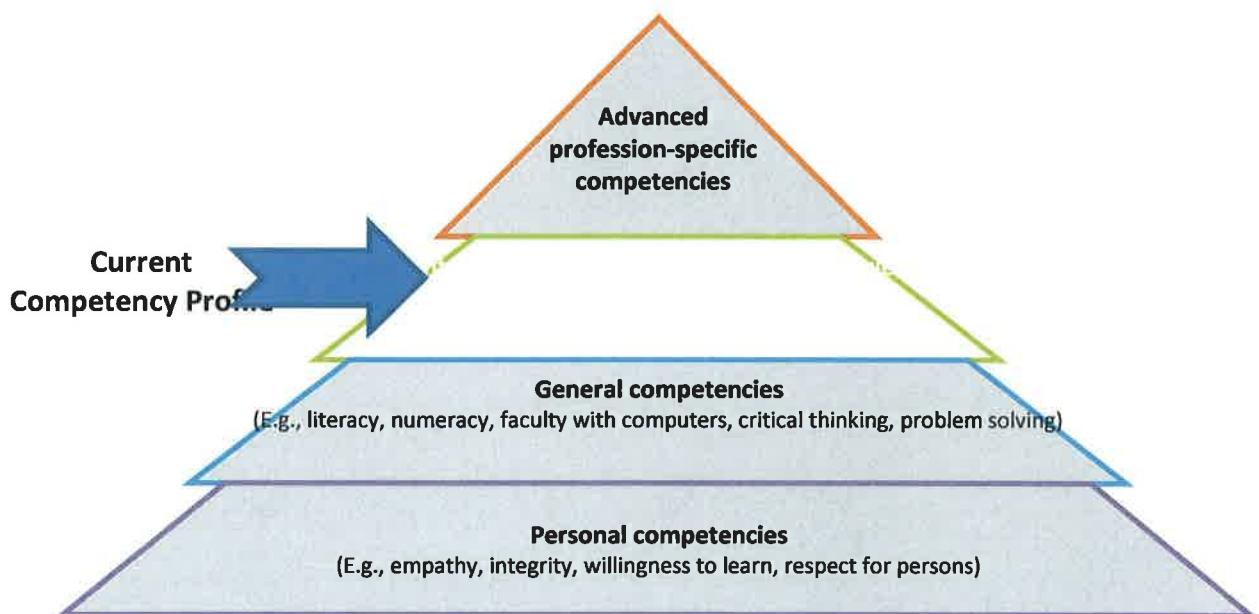
professional practice regardless of their prior educational or professional preparation;
and

- **Advanced profession-specific competencies:** competencies that professionals acquire as they engage in the profession and advanced study.

Some documents describe professional competencies as either technical or behavioural. We have not used those terms because their use in other documents is neither conceptually clear nor consistent. In our view, all competencies included in a competency profile should manifest “professionally” or “occupationally” specific behaviours.

In this Profile we specifically focus on entry-level, profession-specific competencies. Specifically, we describe the minimum requirements for entry to the profession and, thus, not an exhaustive compendium of all the knowledge practitioners require. These core competencies provide the foundation upon which professionals build as they gain more experience and develop more advanced professional competencies that are required for higher level positions.

Figure 1: Levels of competencies in social work



Structure of the Profile

The Profile is organized into six competency blocks which represent key functions in the social work profession. Each competency block is further divided into specific families of

competencies (measurable behavioural characteristics that contribute to successful job performance).

Entry-Level Competency Profile for the Social Work Profession in Canada

The Profile is organized into six competency blocks that present six primary areas of practice, including

- **Applying Ethical Standards:** Competencies required for ethical and responsible service delivery.
- **Conducting Assessments:** Competencies required to determine the needs of the clients and assess their situations and eligibility for services.
- **Planning Interventions:** Competencies required to identify clients' goals and plan appropriate treatment and services.
- **Delivering Services:** Competencies required to provide services to address clients' needs.
- **Improving Policies and Practices:** Competencies required to actively engage in changes social work policies and practices and for effective communication and collaboration with community stakeholders and professionals in social work and other professional areas to address issues related to social work interventions and protect best interests of the clients.
- **Engaging in Reflective Practice and Professional Development:** Competencies required to monitor and manage one's own professional development, attitudes and behaviour to promote and advance the social work practice locally, nationally, and/or internationally.

Each of the competency blocks are further divided into families of key global competencies which consist of competencies that focus on activities of similar nature. For example, **Conducting Assessments** block incorporates three families of competencies: competencies related to assessment of clients' needs and situations, competencies related to gathering pertinent information by questioning and discussions and competencies related to informing and engaging clients in the intake and assessment process. Each of the families contains sub-competencies that describe a range of specific professional activities expressed in measurable terms.

APPLYING ETHICAL STANDARDS

Applying Ethical Standards competency block includes competencies required to ensure ethical and responsible service delivery. The professionals have an obligation to engage in ethical

practice and decision making, protect clients' rights, and follow ethical guidelines and principles in their interactions with clients, colleagues, and external partners.

Table 1: Applying Ethical Standards

Global Competency (families)	Sub-competencies
Identify ethical considerations related to the problem or needs being addressed	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify ethical considerations related to the problem or needs being addressed. 2. Determine whether a planned course of action is consistent with professional ethics.
Act ethically	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Act in accordance with the regulatory framework for social work practice. 4. Evaluate professional and organizational policies, procedures, and materials to assure adherence to social work ethics. 5. Follow appropriate protocols for seeking assistance when facing conflict in the workplace. 6. Ensure proper handling and storing information (including information transmitted electronically) to protect confidentiality. 7. Recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice. 8. Identify and manage conflicts of interest and/or dual relationships with clients or former clients. 9. Establish and maintain clear and appropriate boundaries in professional relationships.
Bring ethical transgressions to the attention of relevant parties	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Address conflicts of interest with relevant parties. 11. Inform clients when a real or potential conflict of interest arises, and take reasonable steps to resolve the issue in a manner that makes the clients' interests primary. 12. Report alleged abuse and neglect in compliance with laws and social work ethics. 13. Identify and address inappropriate behaviour or discriminatory practices. 14. Identify ethical violations and take appropriate action.
Advocate for and engage in practices to further human rights and social justice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 15. Advocate for clients' right to autonomy and self-determination. 16. Protect individuals from the undue influences and abusive use of power. 17. Identify linkages between situation/problem and life conditions, with particular attention to issues of oppression and discrimination. 18. Analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social justice and well-being. 19. Advocate for policies and services sensitive to diversity issues. 20. Advocate for the equitable access of all persons to resources, services and opportunities. 21. Advocate for appropriate resources. 22. Identify how a culture's structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power.

CONDUCTING ASSESSMENTS

Conducting Assessments competency block includes competencies required to select, administer, and interpret screening and assessments to determine the needs of the clients, and assess their situations and eligibility for services. Entry-level social workers need to be able to assess clients (including individuals, families, groups, communities and organizations) as to their needs, issues and challenges, and strengths in order to make informed decisions regarding service planning and delivery. Screening and assessment competencies include: collecting information using a variety of techniques; organizing and interpreting information about the clients and their situations; assessing clients' needs; and motivating and engaging clients in the development of interventions plans.

Table 2: Conducting Assessment

Global Competency (families)	Sub-competencies
Assess clients' <i>situation and needs</i> in relation to current professional standards and jurisdictional requirements	23. Assess clients' eligibility for services.
	24. Assess the strengths, needs and resources of individuals, groups, families, and communities
	25. Assess the nature and severity of clients' crisis situations.
	26. Assess clients' risk of danger to self and others.
	27. Assess suspected abuse and/or neglect.
	28. Assess and refocus clients' individual goals.
	29. Assess the risk of future harm to clients by others.
	30. Assess clients' need for medical evaluation.
	31. Assess clients' use/abuse of alcohol, illegal drugs, or prescribed medication.
	32. Assess clients' needs for training and employment services.
	33. Assess the clients' needed level of care (e.g., geriatric, other special needs, foster or group care).
	34. Assess parenting skills and capacities.
	35. Assess needs for protective services for children.
	36. Assess needs for protective services for adults.
	37. Assess clients' needs for out-of-home placement.
	38. Assess clients' needs for housing.
	39. Assess clients' needs and readiness for adoptive placement.
	40. Assess suitability of applicants to be foster parents.
	41. Assess suitability of applicants to be adoptive parents.
	42. Assess clients' readiness for service.
	43. Assess the impact of biopsychosocial history, including social isolation and marginalization, on the client system.
	44. Assess the impact of cultural factors on the client system
	45. Assess the impact of sexual orientation on the client system.
	46. Assess the impact of spiritual beliefs on client system.
	47. Assess the impact of sexual history on client system.
	48. Assess the impact of addictions on the client system.
	49. Critically analyze social context and barriers as foundational for understanding individual issues and subsequently engage in change efforts to address them.
	50. Critically analyze social context and barriers as foundational for understanding community issues and subsequently engage in change

Global Competency (families)	Sub-competencies
	efforts to address them.
	51. Critique and apply knowledge to understand person and environment.
	52. Administer simple, standardized instruments to measure clients' symptoms and behaviours.
	53. Demonstrate an ability to develop a helping relationship with the client.
	54. Formulate and document conclusions about the assessment.
Gather pertinent information by systematic questioning and discussions	55. Interview clients to gather information from the clients' perspective regarding the nature and degree of problem.
	56. Collect and verify relevant information pertaining to social functioning and development.
	57. Collect and verify information about clients from collateral sources.
	58. Collect and verify clients' biopsychosocial history, including social isolation and marginalization.
	59. Interview clients to gather information on their cultural background.
	60. Interview clients to gather information about their sexual orientation.
	61. Interview clients to gather information about their spiritual beliefs.
	62. Interview clients to gather information about their sexual history.
	63. Maintain and utilize information about resources and community services including the use of technology.
Inform and involve clients in the intake/assessment process	64. Involve clients in the intake/assessment process.
	65. Provide information to clients about policies and services of the agency/practice.
	66. Provide information to clients regarding their rights and responsibilities, including limits to confidentiality.

PLANNING INTERVENTIONS

Planning Interventions competency block includes competencies required to plan appropriate treatment and services that are based on the clients' goals, needs, strengths, and limitations. This collaborative process will require entry-level professionals to participate in identification of clients' goals, matching these goals to intervention activities and strategies, and monitoring/adjusting the intervention plans as needed.

Table 3: Planning Interventions

Global Competency (families)	Sub-competencies
State clearly the nature of the clients' problem or need being addressed	67. State clearly the nature of the clients' problem or need being addressed.
Identify potential interventions appropriate to clients' problem	68. Explain to the clients the range of potential interventions.
	69. Identify program/intervention objectives and outcomes.
Elicit the clients' point of view, suggestions and consent, about the proposed interventions	70. Obtain clients' informed consent for services.
	71. Identify issues regarding involuntary clients and consent.
	72. Identify issues regarding consent with children and youth.
	73. Formulate measurable objectives to assist clients' change.

Global Competency (families)	Sub-competencies
	74. Determine with (or explain to) the client-relevant standards for evaluating proposed interventions.
	75. Discuss with (and explain to) clients ways to assess the outcome of services.
	76. Work with clients to address their own needs and problems in living.
	77. Promote and facilitate clients' participation in decision making.
	78. Engage clients in planning and implementing service plans.
Select from a universe of potential interventions, the intervention that will most likely alleviate the clients' problem/ need.	79. Develop a treatment or service plan based on assessment findings.
	80. Formulate a timeframe for interventions with clients.
	81. Choose/modify intervention methods to meet clients' needs.
	82. Select strategies for community action.
	83. Develop programs and services to meet community needs.
	84. Assess the appropriateness of client service or treatment plans.

DELIVERING SERVICES

Delivering Services competency block incorporates competencies required to provide effective services to address clients' needs. This block includes a wide range of competencies including implementing evidence-informed plans, services, models, and strategies to address needs of individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations, matching clients with appropriate services based on the results of the assessment and planning process, providing information and feedback to clients, collaboration with partner services and community organizations as required, and managing conflicts.

Table 4: Delivering Services

Global Competency (families)	Sub-competencies
Explain the intervention plan to relevant stakeholders involved in the intervention delivery.	85. Identify and communicate with relevant stakeholders about the implications of the intervention plan.
Document various steps in the intervention plan	86. Keep accurate and comprehensive records, documents, and correspondence using appropriate technology.
	87. Prepare reports summarizing work activities.
Implement the intervention according to the established plan	88. Support the development of the clients' competencies particularly with respect to his/her capacity to play different social roles (e.g., worker, parent, community member).
	89. Facilitate groups' mobilization of their resources to reach goals.
	90. Support persons and families dealing with a variety of life-span issues.
	91. Facilitate the development of clients' communication skills effectively.
	92. Provide mediation support during conflict situations.
	93. Provide case management.
	94. Engage with involuntary clients.
	95. Provide psycho-educational services for clients.
	96. Provide group work services to clients.
	97. Provide outreach services to clients and potential clients.

Global Competency (families)	Sub-competencies
	98. Provide feedback to clients about progress toward achieving their goals.
	99. Respond to community emergencies when requested.
	100. Refer clients for services.
	101. Follow up on referrals.
	102. Conduct case conferences.
	103. Apply relevant services as required in accordance with legislation and regulation, including the protection of children, youth, and vulnerable adults, etc.
	104. Implement out-of-home placements.
	105. Provide services in manner that reflects the needs and sensitivities of vulnerable populations.
	106. Motivate and engage with a group of clients in the treatment process.
	107. Design and implement strategies to meet needs of a specific group.
	108. Provide a rationale for one's professional opinion or decision.
	109. Respond to clients and/or community in a timely and reasonable manner.
	110. Facilitate meetings.
	111. Use relevant provincial and federal legislation pertinent to area of practice.
	112. Use research and evaluation and integrate evidence to inform practice.
	113. Provide services to clients in a culturally supportive manner.
	114. Encourage client feedback regarding service.
	115. Inform a client of the client's right to consult another professional at any time during the provision of social work services.
Promote self-determination of clients	116. Understand First Nations history, traditions, and governance.
	117. Identify and manage the dynamics of power in social work relationships.
	118. Identify experts and consult them as needed.
	119. Support clients to obtain needed resources.
	120. Raise awareness of how environment influences human behaviour.
	121. Inform clients about strategies to address separation issues
	122. Inform clients about strategies to address the grieving process.
	123. Inform groups about strategies to create, identify, and use helping networks
	124. Inform clients about strategies to advocate for their rights.
	125. Inform clients about strategies to address issues of discrimination and oppression.
	126. Raise awareness of parents' about child development.
	127. Raise awareness of clients about the impact of their behaviours.
Assess and adjust process of intervention	128. Determine whether the need or problem has been addressed by the intervention.
	129. Adjust the intervention in the light of evidence gathered through monitoring.
	130. Bring intervention process to a conclusion.

IMPROVING POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Improving Policies and Practices competency block includes competencies required to advocate for the improvement of policies and services to better meet the needs of the clients as well as maintain documentation that supports the direct delivery of the services. These are the professional activities that do not involve immediate or personal contact with the client being served.

Table 5: Improving Policies and Practices

Global Competency (families)	Sub-competencies
Assess adequacy of existing policies and practices in light of professional standards	131. Assess adequacy of existing policies and practices in light of professional standards.
	132. Assess organizations' policies and practices.
Determine the change necessary for improving practices and policies	133. Determine the change necessary for improving practices and policies.
	134. In partnership with other stakeholders, perform needs assessments.
	135. Evaluate relative costs of service program alternatives.
Advocate for system change	136. Take action to bring about needed changes.
	137. Establish and maintain professional collaborations.
	138. Promote changes in organizational practices and policies in the best interests of the clients.
	139. Work with colleagues to develop policies and procedures for practice setting.
Work with existing and emerging community organizations	140. Work with grassroots and existing and emerging community organizations and coalitions.
	141. Facilitate participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions.
	142. Facilitate resource capacity building in the community through leadership, support and education.
	143. Collaborate with other professionals and/or community members regarding services and resources.

ENGAGING IN REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Engaging in Reflective Practice and Professional Development competency block includes competences required to effectively monitor and manage one's own professional development, attitudes and behaviour to promote and advance the social work practice. The entry-level professionals are expected to participate in professional development and self-reflection, and maintain currency of social work knowledge.

Table 6: Engaging in Reflective Practice and Professional Development

Global Competency (families)	Sub-competencies
Engage in reflective practice and professional development.	144. Reflect upon one's professional practice.
	145. Evaluate one's practice in light of professional standards.
	146. Establish a personal plan for professional development upon a self-assessment of one's strength and limitations.
	147. Monitor the implementation of one's personal plan for professional development

	148. Adjust the personal plan for professional development in the light of evidence
	149. Develop professional identity through professional development activities.
	150. Contribute to the professional development of others
	151. Receive and use supervision to enhance practice.
	152. Participate in professional development activities.

Next Steps

The Profile presented here describes a set of core professional competencies that can be applied across fields of social work practice in Canada. In addition to favouring full labour mobility, such a framework can be used to clarify standards of social work practice across jurisdictions and, thereby, facilitate the monitoring of expectations and performance in diverse fields of social work practice.

To facilitate understanding of the competencies, it is recommended that the Council:

- develop performance standards and exemplars for each competency at three performance levels: meeting standard, approaching standard, below standard (required for registration);
- develop a communications plan for disseminating the competencies, performance standards, and exemplars to various audiences, including prospective and current students of social work, social work educators, governments, employers, migrants seeking a career in social work, and the general public.
- develop assessments tools that would allow persons with international credentials and experience to demonstrate the competencies required to practice social work in Canada; and
- develop or assist in the development of training programs designed to cultivate the relevant competency(ies) in those cases where persons including those with international credentials fall short of the standards.