

CALL TO ACTION

Strengthening Systems Through Social Work Regulation & Integration

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Recent public statements by Manitoba government leaders and legislators have affirmed the critical role of social workers as mental health professionals and essential contributors to the health and social services. This consensus presents a timely opportunity to align policy, regulation, and workforce planning with that recognition.

This brief recommends four key actions by government officials:

1. Integrate registered social workers into all mental health, child welfare and social service workforce planning
2. Increase public awareness of social workers as regulated mental health professionals
3. Strengthen and consistently apply registration requirements for all eligible social work practitioners
4. Ensure the voices of social workers are included in systems planning

Context

Manitoba's healthcare and social service systems are undergoing significant transformation with a strong policy focus on mental health and addictions care, improved outcomes in child and family services, expanded community-based care and improved coordination across systems. There is also increasing recognition of the need for culturally responsive care, particularly for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, and for approaches grounded in equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Elected officials across government have recognized social workers as highly trained, regulated professionals, emphasized their role in mental health care, child welfare, addictions, community support and beyond. Social workers are uniquely positioned to deliver holistic, person-centered care that integrates clinical expertise with an understanding of social determinants of health, systemic inequities, and the importance of culturally responsive practice. In their practice, social workers are mindful of and respect the need to support culturally competent care. They incorporate inclusive, responsive approaches that recognize diverse identities, lived experiences, and community contexts, and they support care models that are grounded in respect for Indigenous knowledge systems and community-led practices.

Recent commitments to increase hiring of mental health professionals, including social workers, are encouraging. However, public discussion has also revealed inconsistent understanding of the social work profession, underscoring the need for clearer regulation and education. Despite

widespread reliance on social workers, public understanding of their qualifications, scope of practice and regulatory status remains inconsistent. This is exacerbated by the inconsistent application of professional regulation across sectors. Many practitioners who hold social work degrees who are eligible for registration are not required or supported to be regulated in all practice settings.

This inconsistency creates risks, including:

- Confusion for service participants and families about who is qualified to provide care
- Reduced accountability where practitioners are not consistently regulated, which silences the voices of vulnerable Manitobans
- Inconsistent application of ethical and practice standards across agencies and sectors

Recommendations

1. Align Workforce Expansion with Regulation

Social workers deliver evidence-based mental health interventions and are essential to interdisciplinary care teams.

Actions:

- Prioritize hiring registered social workers in mental health positions where appropriate
- Integrate social workers into emergency departments, addictions services, community and outreach teams
- Develop workforce projections and targeted recruitment strategies for social work

2. Establish Social Workers as Core Mental Health Professionals

Clear, consistent messaging will strengthen public trust, improve system navigation, and support recruitment and retention.

Actions:

- Launch a public awareness campaign:
 - “Social workers are regulated mental health professionals”
- Align messaging across government departments to ensure consistency

3. Strengthen and Standardize Registration Requirements

Clear and consistently applied regulatory frameworks are essential to public safety and accountability, quality of care, and effective workforce planning.

Actions:

- Require registration for all eligible practitioners providing services within the scope of social work practice
- Close regulatory gaps by applying consistent registration requirements across sectors, including health, addictions, education, family services, and justice
- Ensure workforce data and planning are based on a fully regulated professional pool

4. Integrate the Voices of Social Workers in System Planning

Meaningful system reform requires the direct involvement of social workers in decision-making processes. As frontline professionals and system navigators, their practice-based expertise is essential to ensuring that policies, workforce strategies, and service design reflect real-world needs and improve outcomes for Manitobans.

Actions:

- Engage social workers directly in policy, workforce, and service planning processes across government and system partners
- Establish formal mechanisms for ongoing consultation with the profession to ensure practice-informed perspectives are consistently reflected in decision-making

Manitoba has a clear opportunity to translate political recognition of social workers into meaningful system improvements. By strengthening regulation, aligning hiring practices, and reinforcing public understanding, the province can build more effective, equitable, and sustainable mental health and social service systems.



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