

INVESTING IN THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION BENEFITS THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF US ALL

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THE TIME IS RIGHT TO INVEST IN SOCIAL WORK.

Issue Statement

Social workers are the backbone of Minnesota's human services and mental health system. Social workers worked diligently to assist people in receiving health care, connecting to community resources, and overcoming grief and loss throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Social workers are a versatile workforce serving Minnesotans in every sector of our society: hospitals, mental health centers, schools, social service agencies, community centers, and politics and advocacy. Minnesota has an aging social work workforce that must be replenished. However the high cost of getting a social work degree, especially in relationships to pay, is a hinderance to people entering and staying in the field. The time to invest in the social work profession is **NOW**.



“A social work degree affords, in my opinion, a lot of well-trained folks to go out and pursue different parts of the social-service world, the behavioral-health world. It gives Minnesota a lot of bang for the buck in terms of qualified workers.”

-Sue Abderholden, executive director of NAMI Minnesota

The Need

[Social workers](#) touch millions of lives each day and it is likely a social worker at some time will assist you, a family member, or a friend. For example, are you a student who needs athletic shoes to participate in sports, but your parents can't afford to buy them? Talk to your school social worker. Do you want a better relationship with your spouse, partner, children, or parents? A social worker can help you forge stronger connections. Are you living with depression, anxiety, or a substance use disorder? A social worker can help you overcome them and thrive.

According to the [National Association of Social Workers](#), “there are more than 700,000 professional social workers employed in the United States” and 17,000 licensed social workers in Minnesota. Social work is continuously identified by the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics as one of the [fastest growing profession](#). Nationally, about [78,300 openings for social workers](#) are projected each year. A survey of new master level social workers found that **91.9%** would recommend a social work degree to others.

“Licensed social workers account for **75%** of the state’s mental health workforce and are considered to be the backbone of the state’s mental health care system.”

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The State of Minnesota’s Social Work Workforce

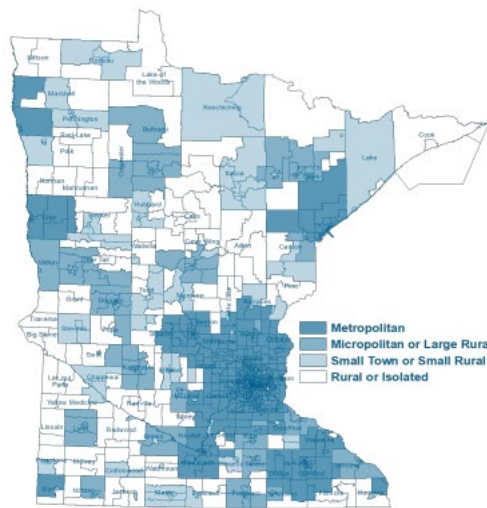
Based on 2018 data, **31%** of Minnesota’s licensed social work workforce planned on retiring within **10 years**.

According to a Minnesota Department of Health [Social Work Workforce Report](#), graduates with master’s degrees in social work increased 21% from 2016 to 2017. However, the need is growing faster than capacity. This problem will only get worse given the aging workforce. In 2018, 25% of licensed social workers were 55 years or older, with 13% planning on retiring within 5 years or less, and another 18 percent retiring in 6 to 10 years.

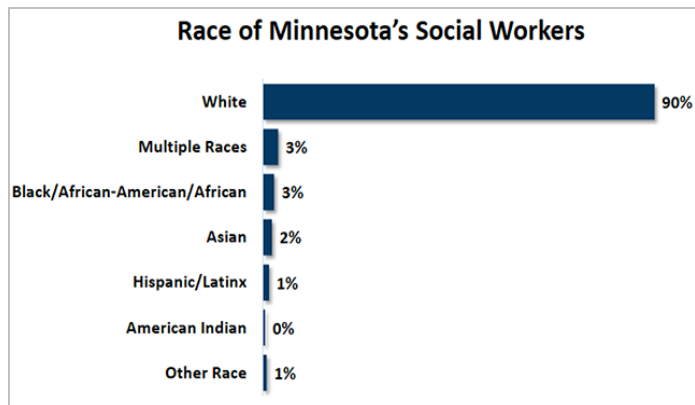
Gender representation is also lacking, with 88% of licensed social workers identifying as female.

Very **rural** parts of the state, already experiencing a degreed and licensed social work workforce shortfall, will be especially disadvantaged. The [Minnesota Population-to-Social Work Ratio](#) by level of rurality in 2019 was:

- Metropolitan = 417:1
- Larger Town = 442:1
- Small Town or Small Rural 491:1
- Isolated Rural = 1,138:1



There is a need for increased **racial/ethnic diversity** within the social work workforce. Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC) currently represent 20.5% of Minnesota’s population. Yet, the [social work workforce is overwhelmingly white](#) (92%), with 93% speaking only English. This means that systems where social workers are employed are failing BIPOC Minnesotans who seek out mental health and other social work services.



About [44 million adults](#) in the United States experience a diagnosable mental illness, and among the nation’s youth, depression is on the rise. Simultaneously, 85% of counties have inadequate or no behavioral health services available. Given the need, this [mental health workforce shortage](#) will burn out and stress the existing workers within the system.

The High Cost of Becoming a Licensed Social Worker Relative to Low Pay

73% of BSW graduates had a loan debt, with an AVERAGE DEBT OF \$29,323.

76.1% of MSW graduates had a loan debt, with an AVERAGE DEBT OF \$46,591 (CSWE)

The high cost of getting a social work degree, especially in relationship to pay, may be keeping people from entering the field. The high cost of getting a license, especially for social workers having to pay for licensing supervision, may be keeping degreed social workers from entering and staying in the profession.

The [median pay in social work](#) is an annual salary of \$51,760 or \$24.88 per hour, with variability by degree and field of practice, among other factors. There is great variability in pay, with the lowest 10 percent earning less than \$33,020, and the highest 10 percent earning more than \$85,820.

The CSWE [2019 Statistics on Social Work Education](#) in the United States report documents that “baccalaureate graduates have more student debt today than graduates did 10 years ago”. The debt load for master’s graduates is even more concerning, with “master’s graduates today having, on average, more than 50% more debt than a graduate 10 years ago”.

Approaches to Investing in the Social Work Workforce: Front-End & Back-End

Aside from the traditional ways that undergraduate and graduate students pay for their education, there are few **FRONT-END** programs available to social workers.

Front-End approaches pay the cost of tuition and fees upfront, reducing the overall cost to the student. Front-end approaches in Minnesota are limited to the following:

- The federal-state [Title IV-E Child Welfare Program](#) supports the recruitment, education, & retention of a skilled public and tribal child welfare workforce at 5 Minnesota universities.
- MSW programs are eligible to apply for a federal SAMHSA [HRSA Behavioral Health Workforce and Education and Training Program for Professionals](#) grant. Students receive a stipend.
- The [Diversity Social Work Advancement Program](#) (DSWAP) trains racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse MSW students to become mental health professionals. 2nd year students pursuing clinical social work receive a small monthly stipend.

The Back-End Approach, Loan Forgiveness, does nothing to attract new people to enter the social work profession. Nor does it do anything to support currently enrolled students manage the demands of course work, mostly unpaid internship, work, and family. Currently, in Minnesota, there are three state-funded loan forgiveness programs available only to social workers with a master's degree and who work in a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) for at least 2 years. These programs only forgive a portion of the average accumulated student loan debt (see Table

below). In addition, all social workers are eligible for the federal [Public Service Loan Forgiveness \(PSLF\) Program](#), which requires 120 “qualifying payments” over a period of 10 years.

Health Professional Education Loan Forgiveness Program	Minnesota Rural & Urban Mental Health Professional Loan Forgiveness:	Minnesota State Loan Repayment Program
Eligible for licensed health care professionals. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 2-year minimum time commitments ▪ Maximum repayment of 15% of average total student loan debt per year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimum of 3 years served to qualify, maximum of 4 years ▪ Only grants a maximum of \$37,000 per recipient. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eligible for a variety of health professionals. ▪ 2 years minimum. ▪ Only funds 5-10 behavioral health professionals per year. ▪ 1 applicant accepted per clinic setting.

Policy Position Statement

The time is right for Minnesota to invest in current and future social workers. Minnesota cannot risk losing experienced social workers that make up the backbone of the human services and mental health system. Incentives are needed to attract people with a passion to help others enter the social work profession. Current degreed and licensed social workers need financial support to remain in the profession to meet the mental health and human served needs in a post-pandemic world. Minnesota must invest in more front-end approaches to reduce the out-of-pocket cost of becoming a degreed and licensed social worker and more back-end approaches to keep social workers in the field.

For these reasons, we recommend the following:

- Partner and fund NASW-MN to develop a comprehensive plan for recruitment and retention of social workers in Minnesota.
- Invest and expand the Diversity Social Work Advancement Program to every BSSW and MSW education program in the state.
- Create a funding stream to provide paid internships and to compensate field placement supervisors and agencies, especially in the non-profit sector.
- Expand the availability of loan forgiveness options for social workers in ALL service sectors.
- Create a one-stop resource to assist licensed social workers with identifying and applying for loan forgiveness programs.
- Create income-based tax reimbursement on the state level for social work licensing fees, examinations, and supervision.
- Support the passage of the federal [Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young Jr., Social Work Reinvestment Act](#).

To access this and other policy advocacy briefs go to: <https://ahn.mnsu.edu/academic-programs/social-work/master-of-social-work/policy-briefs/>