

**INDEPENDENT LICENSURE**  
**Comment from the Iowa Board of Social Work**

*The following article was submitted by the Iowa Board of Social Work Licensure. Members of the Board include 4 social workers and 2 public members: Board Chair, Dave Stout, LMSW (Des Moines), Beth Harms, LISW (Sioux City), Katinka Keith, LISW (Waterloo), Joyce Westphal, LISW (Lenox), Mary Tasler (Ottumwa), La Mark Combs (Davenport)*

In recent months the requirements for social work licensure to practice independently in Iowa have been the subject of discussion and apparent confusion. In order to address concerns that have been raised the Iowa Board of Social Work (Board) established a Ad Hoc Committee to address ways to clarify the supervised practice of candidates working toward the independent level of licensure. Serving on the committee is Bruce Buchanan, LISW; Beth Harms, LISW, Board member; Judy Rinehart, LISW; Kelli Soyer, LMSW, NASW; David Stout, LMSW, Board Chair; and Mary Tasler, Board member.

Iowa Code 154C and Iowa Administrative Code 645—280, govern the licensure and professional practice for Iowa social workers. It is important for every social worker that practices in Iowa to be familiar with the laws and administrative rules that govern licensure. Iowa law, administrative rules and other information regarding LISW licensure is found on the Board's website at [www.idph.state.ia.us/licensure](http://www.idph.state.ia.us/licensure) .

At the website you can find specific references to the law in Iowa Code 154C which establishes licensure in the State of Iowa and FAQ's that address directly the scope of practice for bachelor social workers Iowa Code 154C.1(3)a; master level social workers 154C.1(3)b and "private practice" 154C.1(4).

The law and related administrative rules are clear that only an independent licensed social worker (LISW) is qualified to practice in a private practice providing diagnosis and treatment of mental and emotional disorders or conditions.

In order to obtain licensure as an LISW an individual must;

- 1) Have earned a master's degree or a doctorate degree in social work from a university or college approved by the Board.
- 2) Complete a supervised professional practice. Note: under Iowa law, a candidate must be licensed at the master's level before they can begin practice at this level.
- 3) Pass the clinical level examination.

Items 1 & 3 above are clear cut. Either you have the degree or not. Either you pass the exam or not. Item 2 is more complex and, is of equal importance as 1 and 3.

Iowa Administrative Code 645-280.6 lays out in detail the definitions of and requirements for the supervised professional practice. Critical components of the supervised professional practice are:

- 1) The equivalent of two (2) years of full-time post-master's or doctorate social work degree practice at the master's level performing psychosocial assessment, diagnosis and treatment, or
- 2) At least 4,000 hours of full-time post-master's or doctorate social work degree practice at the master's level over a minimum of two-year and maximum six-year period;
- 3) At least 110 hours of face to face supervision with no more than 60 hours of group supervision (group is no more than six (6) supervisees) which is equitably distributed throughout a minimum of a two-year and maximum six-year period;
- 4) The supervisor must be an Iowa licensed LISW having at least 2,000 hours of practice earned after obtaining the LISW; and
- 5) There is a plan of supervision established at the beginning of the supervision period and maintained throughout the supervision.

During the supervised professional practice the supervisee will conduct all professional activities at the master's level of social work in accordance with the standards for the professional conduct as described in the Iowa Code and Rules. IAC 645-280.6(3) sets out in detail the requirements of the supervised practice as well as content for the plan of supervision.

Neither the Iowa Code nor administrative rules state that an individual must be employed working in a specific practice setting or area of social work during the supervised professional practice. The Code and rules are clear about what constitutes the master's level of practice and the requirements of the supervised professional practice that prepares the social worker for licensure as an independent social worker.

The supervised professional practice that follows being licensed as an LMSW is critical additional experience for master social workers that choose to pursue licensure as an LISW. Setting the proper foundation for the period of supervised professional practice requires the supervisee and the supervisor to establish and document a plan of supervision at the outset of their supervisory relationship.

To establish a successful Plan of Supervision the supervisor must take the time to read and understand IAC 280.6 (1). The supervisee as well must invest the time to thoroughly understand what is required for a plan of supervision. With the supervisor the supervisee must establish a plan that from the start addresses all of the goals, objectives, and practice skills required for the supervised professional practice.

In IAC 280.6(3) the rules are very clear about the importance of establishing a supervisory plan at the start of supervision and maintaining it throughout the supervision period. If you go to that section of the rules you will find specific and important pieces of information that must be included in the written plan.

When the Board receives an application for LISW licensure it reviews all of the supporting documentation including supervision documentation. Problems arise if the report of supervision does not clearly document the goals, objectives and practice skills that were part of the plan of supervision. Lack of clarity has led the Board to ask for more information to determine what knowledge; skills and abilities have been learned and practiced during the supervisory experience. The Board is following the law and the law says that the practice of a master's level social worker includes psychosocial assessment, diagnosis, and treatment that will be provided to individuals, couples, families, and groups.

The Board has consistently maintained the stance that during the supervised professional practice the supervisee must gain knowledge of, understand, and demonstrate the ability to diagnose using the DSM-IV to the satisfaction of the supervisor. Further the clinical level examination used for LISW licensure requires knowledge of the DSM IV. The Board recognizes that the DSM-IV is not the only diagnostic tool utilized by social workers. But, the DSM-IV is integral to providing diagnosis and treatment of mental and emotional disorders or conditions.

The administrative rules contain other requirements for the supervised professional practice, including: ethical practice, clinical practice skills, and other aspects of professional practice. When these rules were originally promulgated the intent was to provide at least a two-year period of supervision to allow the master's level social worker to gain the experience necessary to integrate academic knowledge into practice.

Something that we must bear in mind is the purpose of professional licensure is to protect the public. Licensure was not created to bestow professional status. In order to independently practice clinical social work, which involves diagnosis and treatment of mental and emotional conditions or disorders, a supervised experience is an additional layer of experience needed to acquire the minimal competence necessary for public protection.

The profession of social work has many practice settings. The profession of social work includes a wide range of skills. The profession of social work is an ever evolving and lifelong learning process done independently and under supervision.

The Board wishes to thank the members of the ad hoc committee for their continuing work on this important issue.