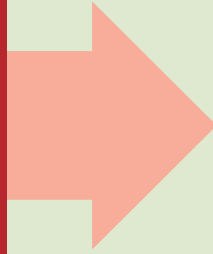


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# THE ROLE OF CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKERS on Voter Engagement Efforts

**CHERYL AGUILAR, LICSW, LCSW-C**



Social workers are at the forefront of issues that affect

community members from all walks of life. Whether engaged in micro, mezzo, or macro work or in academia, social workers move the needle to help individuals, groups, and communities rise above their challenges and toward desired goals.

The diverse force of social workers in the United States touches every possible societal problem—from addressing homelessness to behavioral challenges, to environmental issues to immigration, to health disparities to poverty, and on and on.

Although social workers interact with society at all levels, there has been a documented lack of voter engagement efforts from social

workers and the agencies that employ them, particularly among social workers in micro practice, due to factors such as perceiving voter engagement work separate from their micro sphere (Abramovitz et al., 2019).

This article explores common misconceptions that may prevent clinical social workers from active voter engagement work within or outside of their individual and agency-level

practices. It presents ideas on how clinical social workers can ethically participate in voter engagement efforts while honoring clients' self-determination and agency and attending to limitations within their roles and practice.

Let's begin by defining the term *clinical social work*.

NASW defines *clinical social work* as "a specialty practice area of social work which focuses on the assessment,



diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental illness, emotional, and other behavioral disturbances. Services by clinical social workers are performed in a variety of settings including private practice, hospitals, community mental health, primary care, and agencies” (NASW, 2020).

Here are some of the myths surrounding voter engagement.

#### **Voting and voter engagement is not clinical.**

Although clients may not attend clinical sessions with voting as their presenting issue, Dr. Darla Spence Coffey, president and CEO of the Council of Social Work Education, believes that voting is a social determinant of health (D. Spence Coffey, personal communication, March 11, 2020). Historically, voter suppression tactics have left undeserved and oppressed communities out of the political process. Many of the issues affecting clients connect

directly with different political processes and the values and issues elected officials in office support. Issues like immigration reform, health care reform, and environmental causes, to name a few, are highly debated at congressional, state, and local levels. Therefore, a client’s healing can be associated with changes in policy and systems. And it is constituents—everyday people, all of us—who can effect change by exercising their right to vote.

NASW’s *Code of Ethics*, standard 6.02, contends that “social workers should facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions,” (NASW, 2020). Facilitating information can be achieved in clinical practice with mindful exploration. During your practice, be attentive for opportunities to explore whether a client may need more information related to voting or access—for instance, if a client expresses concerns about time off during

election day, or not knowing where to go vote. The social worker’s role as facilitators of education should be limited to providing relevant information without influencing the client’s decision. Using a simple mindful listening approach, we can become more attuned to our clients’ needs and gauge opportunities for engagement.

#### **Discussing voting will take away from a client’s presenting issue.**

Research shows that voter participation enhances psychological well-being. Social work scholars have noted that voting has been correlated with higher levels of health and mental health (Abramovitz et al., 2019).

Clinical social workers are trained to meet clients where they are and follow their lead on the issues, they want to discuss rather than to push an agenda. It is important to distinguish our own desire to effect change and balance this with the client’s perceived needs. One covert way to let

clients know that they are safe to talk about any issues is having nonpartisan literature (pamphlets, flyers, etc.) visible in the office, similarly to how we may have LGBTQ symbols or other welcoming texts.

#### **I am a micro, not macro, social worker.**

Although our social work training and occupations may pertain to a specific area of social work, such as clinical mezzo or macro, social workers are trained to see distress through an environmental lens. Clinical social workers see firsthand how societal issues affect community members, and this insight offers an opportunity to fully grasp how policy, systems, advocacy, and healing are interconnected. Clinical social workers have a viable opportunity to integrate and interconnect the values of our profession of service and social justice.

The Clinical Social Work Association’s *Code of Ethics*, standard VI, addresses clinical

social workers' responsibilities to the community, noting that "clinical social workers recognize a responsibility to participate in activities leading toward improved social conditions. They should advocate and work for conditions and resources that give all people equal access to the services and opportunities required to meet basic needs and to develop to their fullest potential" (Clinical Social Work Association, 2020).

### Recommendations

Social workers represent the nation's largest professional group that provides mental health services (NASW, 2020). They have the potential to support thousands of people on voter participation. Clinical social can engage in nonpartisan voter awareness efforts, to educate and mobilize communities to exercise one of the most significant empowerment actions: voting, the hallmark of a democracy.

- Learn about existing voter engagement and social work efforts from campaigns and from organizations such as

Voting Is Social Work (<https://votingissocialwork.org/>) and the National Association of Social Workers ([www.socialworkers.org](http://www.socialworkers.org)).

- As you self-reflect and consider how you may be able to effect change beyond clinical impact, I recommend as a first step checking in on your own assumptions or feelings on your role on voter engagement.
- If feelings and assumptions are grounded on a not-knowing stance, turn to research, NASW's *Code of Ethics*, and your practice's or agency's policies to guide your decision on whether to engage in voter participation efforts.
- If you are exploring efforts outside of your own practice, consider your emotional bandwidth. If there is a drive to do more, it is important to do so while balancing work and life.
- If your plate is full but you are looking to support

efforts, become familiar with social media or online voter engagement efforts you can support that may take less time.

- If you decide that voter engagement is not for you or your practice, consider delegating that educational task to someone within your practice or agency or providing clients referrals to others who may be able to provide relevant voting information.

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## UPCOMING LIVE SPS WEBINAR

**MONDAY, JUNE 22, 2020 (1 – 2:30 PM ET)**

**Co-constructing Community: Visualizing and Realizing a 2020 Vision of Care and Justice in Social Work**

**Presenter:** Tina Maschi, PhD, LCSW, ACSW

**CE Category:** 1.5 Social Work contact hour

This presentation builds the case for the need for a new collective vision to address the inherent underlying root causes of historic social work issues and concludes with a discussion of how social workers can assist in "co-constructing" community with others by becoming conscious co-creators in developing and refining solution-focused grassroots and professional interventions for individuals, families, communities, and the world.

**To register visit:** The SPS Webinar Catalog

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- Aging
- Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs
- Child Welfare
- Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults
- Health
- Mental Health
- Private Practice
- School Social Work
- Social and Economic Justice & Peace
- Social Work and the Courts

For submission details and author guidelines, go to [SocialWorkers.org/Careers/Specialty-Practice-Sections/Author-Guidelines](http://SocialWorkers.org/Careers/Specialty-Practice-Sections/Author-Guidelines). If you need more information, email [sections@socialworkers.org](mailto:sections@socialworkers.org).



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