

**NASW Leadership Ladders Series:
Steps to a Great Career in Social Work**

Opening a New Private Practice

This article was copied from the NASW New Leadership Series titled *Leadership Ladders: Steps to a Great Career in Social Work*. Readers can access this document, along with many others in the Leadership Series, by visiting NASW national website at <http://careers.socialworkers.org/professionaldev/default.asp#leadership>.

Introduction

One of the most frequently asked questions from NASW members is, “How do I open or start a new private practice?” This specialty area of social work practice is very attractive to social workers looking for a practice setting where they can be the primary decision makers in an independent work environment. The primary focus of private practice is generally psychotherapy. Federal and state statutes and regulations govern clinical social work psychotherapy practice. Clinical social workers should familiarize themselves with these laws and the basics of setting up a private practice to develop an effective framework for a successful business.

Qualifications

In order to set up a private practice as a clinical social worker, one must have the following credentials:

- A master’s degree in social work from an accredited school of social work
- A minimum of two years or 3,000 hours of post-graduate experience in a supervised, clinical setting. (Some states require more. Check with your state licensure board for a confirmation of hours.)
- A clinical license in the state where the practice will be located.

To Setup a Practice

Although the services provided in a private practice are clinical, it is important to remember that it is also a business that requires preparation, organization and a business plan to be successful. Enrolling in a basic business course or workshop to acquire specific business skills and become familiar with key business practices can be very helpful in opening a private practice. Many social workers hire a practice management company to help with the business aspect of the practice.

Models of Private Practice

Private practitioners may work in a solo or group practice. A solo practice has one clinician who is responsible for providing psychotherapy services and in most cases, owns the private practice. A group practice may have two or more clinicians who provide

psychotherapy services. The clinicians may operate independently and bill for their individual services or they may work for the group who bills for them and provides other benefits. A group practice may be owned by one or more of the clinicians or by someone else such as an investor. The decision to open a solo or group practice depends on the preference of the clinical social worker starting the business. Both models can be profitable and successful.

National Provider Identification Number

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) requires every mental health provider seeking reimbursement to obtain a National Provider Identification Number known as the NPI. This number identifies the provider rendering the services and is required for any provider submitting paper or electronic claims, or collecting cash from patients. You may request an individual or group NPI number. The application is brief and simple to complete and can be obtained from the National Plan and Provider Enumeration System at 1-800-465-3203. You may also apply online at <https://nppes.cms.hhs.gov>.

Tax Identification Number

When opening a private practice, it is best to obtain a tax identification number solely for the practice. Doing so separates your personal financial affairs from your professional business. You may obtain a tax identification number from the federal government by completing IRS Form SS-4. Forms are available online from the Internal Revenue Service at <http://www.irs.gov>.

Professional Liability Insurance

Professional liability insurance is required when opening a private practice. The amount of coverage is dependent on several factors including state regulations, requirements of insurance companies, and the type of social work practices. Coverage should be maintained continuously to avoid gaps in time that would not be covered. Additional information about professional liability insurance can be obtained online from NASW Assurance Services at <http://www.naswassurance.org>.

Incorporating Your Practice

A solo or group practice may be incorporated and is authorized in most states. In addition to tax benefits, incorporating is a good way to separate and protect your personal assets. Discuss your business plan with a financial, business, or legal consultant to decide if incorporating is the best option for you.

Forms

There are many different forms for a private practice which may be developed to fit the needs of your practice. Forms for intake, release of information and financial agreement include a few that are needed. HIPAA requires a specific set of forms for privacy and other policies. NASW has available for its members sample HIPAA forms which are available online at <http://www.socialworkers.org/hipaa/sample.asp>.

Supervision

Although a clinical social worker in private practice has already met state licensure supervision requirements, it is best practice to continue with supervision or meet with a consultant on a regular basis to discuss cases particularly problematic ones. This is especially beneficial in legal situations involving liabilities.

Getting On Provider Panels

Most managed care companies offer opportunities for clinical social workers to provide mental health services to their members on a contractual basis. Contact the Provider Relations Division of the managed care company of your choice and request an application to become a member of their provider panel in your area. NASW provides an online list of national managed care companies at <http://socialworkers.org/practice/clinical/csw0405.pdf>.

Marketing Your Practice

Marketing your practice is key to receiving referrals, especially if you seek referrals beyond managed care companies and other health plans. A primary goal for successful marketing is to make decision-makers aware of who you are, what services you provide,

Federal and state statutes and regulations govern clinical social work psychotherapy practice. Marketing your practice is key to receiving referrals, especially if you seek referrals beyond managed care companies and other health plans.

Investing in a Web page to advertise your practice and obtaining a business e-mail address to receive referrals and inquiries is a great way to seek referrals. Traditional marketing such as posting flyers on community bulletin boards, an advertisement in a community newspaper or home association newsletters also work well. You may also list your practice in the *NASW Online National Social Worker Finder* referral database at <http://www.helpstartshere.org/find-a-social-worker>.

Setting Fees

When setting fees for a private practice, there are several factors to take into consideration including the economy, the geographical location, fees of insurance companies and other mental health providers. Decide on an amount that is fair and reasonable for your practice with consideration given to any contractual obligation assigned under third-party payer agreements.

NASW Resources

NASW offers several additional products to help clinical social workers open a private practice, including the following:

- *NASW Clinical Social Work Web Page*
An online resource designed for clinical social work practice updates and other relevant resources. Reimbursement, billing codes, and documentation are examples of information available at <http://socialworkers.org/practice/clinical/default.asp>.

- *Clinical Social Workers in Private Practice*
A Reference Guide is an excellent resource for clinical social workers starting a private practice or for the experienced clinical social worker seeking an overview of private practice—available at <http://www.naswpress.org>.
- *Third-Party Reimbursement for Clinical Social Work Services*
This document discusses reimbursement information such as how to file a claim, vendor provisions, Medicare and other health plans, and State Insurance Commissions and is available online at <http://www.naswpress.org>.
- *NASW Standards for Clinical Social Work in Social Work Practice*.
<http://socialworkers.org/practice/standards/NASWClinicalSWStandards.pdf>.
- *NASW and ASWB Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*.
<http://socialworkers.org/practice/standards/NASWTechnologyStandards.pdf>.
- *NASW Code of Ethics*.
<http://socialworkers.org/pubs/code/default.asp>.
- *NASW Private Practice Specialty Practice*
Section provides clinical social workers with practice resources, information, and networking opportunities with other private practitioners in independent practice. Join online at <http://www.socialworkers.org/sections> or call (202) 408-8600, ext. 499.