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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 50
Issue 1 *Anti-Trans Policies and Social Work
Education*

Article 11

2023

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Recommended Citation

Whitfield, Darren L.; Westgate, Liam; Gartner, Rachel E.; Jacobs, Leah A.; and Atteberry-Ash, Brittanie (2023) "Anti-Transgender Policies and Practices in Social Work Education, Accreditation, and Licensing: A Call for Change," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 50: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol50/iss1/11>

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Anti-Transgender Policies and Practices in Social Work Education, Accreditation, and Licensing: A Call for Change

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The social work profession is guided by the values of social justice and the dignity and worth of the person. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics requires that all social workers act in a professional manner consistent with these values. These values mandate that social workers “challenge social injustice on behalf of and in concert with vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups.” Yet, historically, and contemporarily, the social work profession and national professional organizations (i.e., NASW, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), Associate of Social Work Boards (ASWB), Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR), and the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASW) have failed to advocate for and work in solidarity with transgender and gender expansive (TGE) individuals and groups to advance social justice. This commentary will examine how the social work profession and its national professional

organizations have not followed the NASW Code of Ethics as it relates to TGE communities. Specifically, the article will (1) unpack the ways in which explicit and implicit social work curriculum and standards in accredited US social work programs do little to equip students to effectively serve transgender clients and communities upon graduation, (2) discuss the lack of advocacy for and solidarity with TGE communities from professional social work organizations, and (3) review policies governing the licensure of social work practitioners related to culturally responsive social work practice with TGE clients and communities. This commentary provides a set of recommendations for countering and reducing transphobia in the social work profession in the areas education, practice, and policy. We conclude with a call for change for the social work profession that achieves the values of social justice and dignity and worth of TGE individuals, groups, and communities.

Keywords: transgender and gender expansive; social work practice; social work education; policy

Transgender and gender expansive (TGE) communities are at higher risk of experiencing discrimination, harassment, and victimization compared to cisgender and gender conforming communities (Austin, 2016; Casey et al., 2019; Farvid et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2011; Kattari et al., 2016). In recent months, discrimination against TGE communities has become more prevalent, with state government officials enacting policies that ban transgender children from school sports, deny access to bathrooms, restrict pronoun usage in class, and silence supportive adults in educational settings. In one recent case that captured national attention, Governor Abbott of Texas signed an executive order directing the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to initiate child abuse investigations against parents who supported their TGE child in accessing medically necessary gender-affirming care (Coughlin & Cahn, 2022). The executive order and legal opinion issued by the Governor and State Attorney General of Texas, while not legally binding, has dangerous implications for families with TGE children and social workers in Texas working within the DFPS. Such legislative efforts not only adversely impact TGE youths' daily lives but also further entrench transphobia within social welfare systems—forcing social

workers into professional scenarios in which they are tasked with engaging in hostile and harmful professional practices towards TGE youth and their family systems. These recent examples of anti-TGE legislation and actions illustrate the unique challenges the social work profession faces when working with a marginalized community and offers an opportunity for the profession to embody the Code of Ethics.

The national social work organizations (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], Association of Social Work Boards [ASWB], Society for Social Work and Research [SSWR], and the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare [AASWSW]), each in their unique capacity, are tasked with ensuring that social workers practice according to the values and ethics of the profession and chart the course for social work practice and research. As such, these bodies set the direction of social work's diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice agendas. Recognizing this significance, the aim of this commentary is to identify the potential role of national social work professional organizations in developing, implementing, and evaluating social work practice with TGE individuals in the areas of educational standards that inform the work of future social workers, the accrediting of social work programs, state licensing policies and procedures, and policy advocacy. This paper also provides recommendations for our professional bodies by centering anti-oppressive practice as a guiding framework.

Anti-oppressive frameworks recognize that societal power is unequal with power concentrated in specific social groups based on race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Furthermore, anti-oppressive frameworks posit that power differentials impact social interactions and are infused in social structures and institutions (Baines, 2011; Clifford & Burke, 2005; Danso, 2015; Hines, 2012). An anti-oppressive lens interrogates social structures and institutions which are inherently oppressive, seeks to dismantle oppressive practices and processes, and centers the experiences of marginalized groups to develop solutions to oppressive structures, institutions, practices, and processes (Clifford & Burke, 2005; Danso, 2015). Taking an anti-oppressive orientation, we envision social work as a profession that recognizes the ways in which sociopolitical forces harm TGE individuals, seeks to dismantle those forces, and centers and affirms

the value and human rights of TGE individuals and communities in doing so.

Background

Over 1.6 million adults and youth identify as transgender in the United States (Herman et al., 2022). Despite comprising a comparatively small percentage of the total population, TGE communities experience a disproportionately high level of systemic discrimination. In recent years, studies have highlighted the myriad of health, employment, and education inequities faced by TGE populations when compared to cisgender peers (Goldsen et al., 2022; Scheim et al., 2022). This growing body of research has also highlighted the widespread discrimination across these sectors (Bradford et al., 2013), with healthcare discrimination making care inaccessible (Bakko & Kattari, 2020; Romanelli & Lindsey, 2020), employment discrimination leading to hostile and unsafe environments (Kattari et al., 2016; Rosich, 2020), and educational discrimination making schools intimidating spaces where students are disconnected from their education experience and preoccupied with survival (Kosciw et al., 2020; McGuire et al., 2010). These disparities, across the life course, are highly consequential as they go beyond a representation of victimization to a depiction of diminished life chances or critically important opportunities necessary for survival. Spade (2015) discusses the ways in which life chances such as access to rights like legal protection, employment, and medical care are administered through “traditional” gender categories producing trans vulnerability (Spade, 2015). Gender and other identity markers become weaponized with binary categories and traditional gender norms positioned as threatened national values and trans-exclusion and violence normalized to protect these values. As we will discuss, social work as a profession has been complicit in reproducing these harms and our training programs have done little to disrupt these trends.

The state policy landscape has exacerbated discrimination against TGE individuals and communities, codifying unequal treatment into many of our systems and rendering permissible the systemic exclusion of and harm to TGE individuals and communities. Legislative attempts to restrict TGE rights have been on the rise (Witt & Medina-Martinez, 2022). Thus far in 2022, we have

seen the restriction of healthcare access for TGE youth with legislation introduced in 22 states (e.g., AL, FL, MO) and one (e.g., AZ) making the bill law (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2022); TGE individuals denied access to single-sex facility's with legislation introduced in 5 states (e.g., SD, MS, MN) and one (i.e., OK) making the bill law; the exclusion of TGE youth from athletics with legislation introduced in 29 states (e.g., RI, PA, MD) and eight making the bill a law (e.g., TN, SD, HI); curricular restrictions related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues with legislation introduced in twenty states (e.g., NJ, VA, NC), and two making the bill law (i.e., FL, AZ; ACLU, 2022). This is not an exhaustive list of anti-TGE legislative activity but exemplifies the ways in which TGE individuals and communities have been targeted and dehumanized in many of their home states. The marginalization of TGE individuals has become a political device—a divisive rallying cry for extremists to solidify their platform by restricting TGE individuals' life chances. TGE individuals and communities, as with other marginalized groups, are pushed to the margins to define the boundaries of our society (Collins, 2000) as it relates to gender identity.

This legislative climate is actively harmful with both direct restrictions in access to affirming care (e.g., gender-affirming surgeries, access to hormone replacement therapy etc.) and indirect by-products (e.g., increased minority stressors) leading to widespread health and mental health challenges for TGE individuals (Barbee et al., 2022). Trans-affirming care, specifically, is associated with better overall health (Delozier et al., 2020) and lower rates of suicidal ideation (Turban et al., 2020) than is seen in TGE youth who desire care but do not receive it. Legislation that prohibits medical providers from providing TGE affirming health services will undoubtedly continue to exacerbate health and mental disparities (Barbee et al., 2022). Laws that block access to participation in sports open TGE youth up to harassment and block their access to the affirming and protective aspects of athletic participation (Barbee et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2017a, 2017b). Additionally, denial of access to single sex facilities (including but not limited to bathrooms) send the message to TGE individuals that they are not welcome in their communities and increase their vulnerability to harassment and violence (Barbee et al., 2022). Not only is legislation harmful once passed, the active discriminatory rhetoric and general climate created when the

legislation is introduced, and the uncertainty that TGE individuals face as they work to survive in these hostile environments, has been associated with poor mental health outcomes (Hughto et al., 2022). This environment of chronic minority stress compounds health and mental health disparities while the policy landscape limits life chances, actively blocking such critical resources as affirming medical care and access to space and opportunity, thereby reinforcing negative outcomes (Du Bois et al., 2018).

Historical context is critical to understanding social work's position in the current legislative climate pertaining to TGE rights. The role of social workers as gatekeepers to affirming care and enforcers of binary gender norms predates this political moment. Social workers have directly contributed to the oppression of TGE communities through their role in the classification of TGE individuals as mentally ill (Shelton et al., 2019). TGE identity has been pathologized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) since the 1980s and while contemporary classification of gender dysphoria in the DSM-V better describes issues surrounding identity outside the gender binary, it still pathologizes and places the issues of concern in the individual rather than society (Markman, 2011; Shelton et al., 2019). Not only are these diagnoses inherently othering and harmful, they also frequently stand between TGE individuals and gender affirming care with diagnosis required as a part of World Professional Association for Transgender Health's Standards of Care for receiving affirming hormones and surgeries. Implicit in these requirements is the belief that social workers, psychiatrists, and other mental health practitioners are necessary to designate gender and that a TGE individual cannot do this for themselves (Shelton et al., 2019). This oppressive stance is actively harmful and social workers have been intimately engaged in these gatekeeping practices.

Social workers have also been complicit in the mandated reporting laws that have historically and contemporarily policed and harmed minoritized communities (Kelly & Varghese, 2018; Lee, 2022; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2022; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). As Harrell and colleagues (2022) discuss, mandated reporting laws establish a system of surveillance that criminalizes and destabilizes families, compromises survivor agency, and contextualizes abuse and neglect in individual and family systems without attention to

societal harms. Current political tactics are engaging mandated reporting on TGE communities, but the harms of mandated reporting policing enacted by social workers are not new (Harrell et al., 2022; Jacobs et al., 2021). As social workers seek to address the harms of political shifts on TGE communities, we must move beyond a recitation of the profession's values to an examination of historical and contemporary harms that we must remedy to make meaningful progress.

The current legislative climate directly impacts social workers, as service providers who must navigate legal mandates and personal and professional commitments to social justice. Recent studies have highlighted the ways in which clinical providers have reported increased moral distress and anxiety, have been subject to harassment, and have had to navigate the personal and legal consequences of compliance versus care provision (Warling & Keuroghlian, 2022). Similar trends have been noted in social work, with anti-oppressive practitioners leaving the profession because they see anti-TGE legislative changes as a betrayal of social work goals and values and refuse to take on the surveillance role being pushed in their states (e.g., Texas) (Harrell et al., 2022; Paulsen, 2022). Social workers have a role in the medical, child welfare, and education systems impacted by new legislative attacks. This means that not only are we, as social workers and social work educators, hugely impacted by these changes, but that our social work profession has a responsibility to take coordinated action.

Roles of Practice for National Organizations

The five major national associations charged with safeguarding and advancing the social work profession are the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR), and the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW). Each organization manages a different aspect of the profession and collectively they are tasked with the maintenance of the profession and its professional standards of practice. NASW is a professional membership organization for social workers and works to create and maintain professional standards, advance social work policies,

and provide professional development and growth opportunities for social workers (National Association of Social Workers, 2022a). NASW is the largest social work association in the world, with both a national presence and fifty-five chapters in states and territories across the United States, CSWE's primary responsibility is to accredit and reaffirm social work education programs in the United States (cswe.org). CSWE develops educational standards that social work education programs must adhere to maintain accredited status. The ASWB is an organization responsible for the establishment of social work regulations in the United States. The ASWB provides guidance and support to state social work boards and for licensure processes (Association of Social Work Boards, 2022). Furthermore, ASWB develops and administers the social work licensure exam for all states. AASWSW is an honorific society of social work and social welfare scholars who primarily seek to recognize those who contribute to the science of social work and to promote scholarly and practice endeavors that advance social reform. The group developed the Grand Challenges of Social Work; an initiative to impact social progress through social work and social welfare (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, 2022). SSWR is a society whose mission is to advance social work practice through research by dissemination and translation (Society for Social Work and Research, 2022). The member-based organization helps to promote research related to the profession of social work globally.

Together these organizations actively shape the social work profession—they set the values and ethics of the profession; develop educational standards; disseminate information; maintain licensure, practice principles, and standards; inform and promote best practices; provide professional development opportunities; acknowledge the contributions of social work leaders; and guide policy advocacy and the science of social work. Given the reach of these organizations, each has a role in promoting policies and practice that affirm TGE individuals and communities and supports the human rights of TGE individuals and communities. Yet these organizations have not worked in concert with one another to present a unified profession with a clear commitment to affirming and supporting TGE individuals and communities. Subsequently, we outline areas where, collectively, the profession of social work

can advance on this social justice front, thus embodying the values of social work and the Code of Ethics.

Current State of the Social Work Profession

Educational Policies

The foundational knowledge and skills employed in social work practice are often developed during matriculation through an accredited social work program as many states require graduation from a CSWE-accredited program to practice social work. After the initial accreditation process, social work programs are reviewed every seven years for compliance with the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) developed by CSWE. The EPAS uses a competency-based framework, outlining nine areas of professional social work practice that each program must address. Each program must demonstrate how they implement the competencies and assess a student's mastery of the areas of practice. In addition to demonstrating compliance with social work practice competencies, each program must illustrate how it conforms to the values outlined by the Code of Ethics. This is assessed through the program's mission, inclusion of anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (A DEI) in the program, explicit curriculum, implicit curriculum, and assessment. Programs are responsible for reflecting the core values of the social work profession in all areas. In 2021, CSWE added A DEI as an area for programmatic evaluation (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2022), marking the first time CSWE explicated the importance of A DEI as a requirement for accredited social work programs (CSWE, 2022). The EPAS state "programs provide the context through which students learn about their positionality, power, privilege, and difference and develop a commitment to dismantling systems of oppression such as racism, that affect diverse populations" (p. 16). As with all competencies, the A DEI competency describes the behavior of a social work practitioner who has mastered the competency.

While the inclusion of this requirement is important to address inequities, the new mandate is broad and lacks specific guidance about the implementation of A DEI. Specifically, there has been criticism that CSWE as a body and the EPAS have been insufficient

in addressing anti-transgender discrimination, harassment, and victimization occurring at many institutions of higher education housing accredited social work programs and within accredited social work programs (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Craig et al., 2017; Wagaman et al., 2018). Through the explicit un-naming anti-transgender oppression in the EPAS, CSWE reinforces anti-transgender practices and policies. Currently, CSWE accredits programs housed within colleges and universities which have policies that directly discriminate against TGE students. A recent analysis of religiously affiliated higher education institutions with social work programs found 40% of programs had anti-LGBT policies (Prock et al., 2022). In many of these institutions, anti-LGBT policies are anchored under formal religious support, student codes of conduct or within university policies which deny equal rights and opportunities for TGE students. For example, several accredited programs are housed at religiously affiliated institutions with explicit values related to Christianity; these institutions promote heterosexual sexual behavior, define marriage within a heterosexual context only, and condemn gender expansive identities (Atteberry-Ash, 2018; Prock et al., 2022). Despite maintaining discriminatory policies, CSWE allows these institutions to keep their accreditation status under the guise of religious exemption for private institutions of higher education (Dentato et al., 2016; Wagaman et al., 2018). In addition, CSWE maintains the accreditation of social work programs that do not conform to the social work value of social justice and dignity and respect for persons. These programs are currently housed at institutions of higher education which do not affirm the identities of TGE students including the exclusion of accessible restrooms, refusal to use chosen names and correct pronouns, and health plans that do not cover gender affirming services (Austin et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2015).

In addition to issues with accreditation, social work education lacks competence in two areas critical to TGE-affirming social work practice: creating and maintaining a supportive environment for TGE students in social work training programs, and curricular guidance and standards related to training future practitioners to work with TGE service user populations. In 2012, a study conducted by CSWE's Council on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (CSOGIE); *Social Work Speaks Out*; found widespread

concerns within social work programs related to sexual and gender minority identities (Craig et al., 2015). Among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students, 33% reported experiencing homophobia or transphobia in their social work programs (Craig et al., 2016). In addition to hostile environments, the study revealed a lack of LGBTQ course content and readiness to practice with LGBTQ communities, particularly content related to working with TGE communities. For instance, in the CSWE study, one in every two social work students do not have any discussion of TGE topics or themes in their programs (Craig et al., 2016; Dentato et al., 2016). After the findings were released, CSWE CSOGIE published several guides to address the concerns outlined by the Speak Out report; addressing anti-LGBTQ microaggressions in the classroom (McInroy et al., 2019) and affirmative practices to support LGBTQ faculty, staff, and students (Austin et al., 2016; Craig, Alessi, et al., 2016). Yet, research suggests these initiatives have yet to create supportive environments for transgender and non-binary social work students, as LGBTQ students continue to experience harms in social work programs (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Messinger et al., 2020; Wagaman et al., 2018). One study found LGBTQ students experienced erasure of their identities and enforcement of hetero/cisnormative standards in the classroom (Messinger et al., 2020). A potential reason for the continued anti-TGE experiences may be due to the lack of specific TGE affirmative policies and approaches in CSWE's ADEI guidelines.

Social Work Licensure

The licensure process is designed to protect the public and ensure social workers are adequately prepared to provide services to vulnerable communities, however currently, many licensure guidelines omit anti-transgender oppression or blatantly oppress TGE communities. Social work licensure is overseen by each state's social work licensing board with guidance and support from ASWB. Each state's board determines the standards of professional social work practice and issues licenses to practice social work based on these standards (Apgar & Luquet, 2022; Association of Social Work Boards, 2018). Since licensure is conducted at the state-level, there is variation across states about the scope of practice by licensed

social workers (Apgar & Luquet, 2022; Gricus, 2022). For example, the educational level which requires licensure (i.e., baccalaureate, master's level) to practice social work, continuing education hours, and inclusion of various professions in social work licensure all differ by state (Gricus, 2022). Furthermore, depending upon state policies, social workers may be required to engage in practices that are antithetical to the values of the profession and the Code of Ethics (Davis, 2020; DiFranks, 2008; Floyd & Rhodes, 2011). For example, state-led efforts attempting to criminalize the delivery of gender affirming care for TGE people pose unique challenges to licensed social workers who must decide between following discriminatory directives and their professional Code of Ethics. In Texas, Governor Abbott's issuance of a directive aligned with Attorney General Ken Paxton's opinion - requiring the state's DFPS to investigate parents with children receiving gender-affirming medical care. These actions had direct implications for professionals, including social workers, to become potentially criminally liable and barred from practice for not reporting families to child protective services under child abuse laws. Licensed social workers committed to anti-oppressive practice risk compromising their Texas-issued license because of the potential for criminal charges. Similar harmful and coordinated efforts are being replicated across the country as most recently evidenced in Florida's Board of Medicine and Osteopathic Medicine signing off on measures to further ban access to gender-affirming medical care for TGE minors (Sarkissian, 2022). These examples highlight the evolving perils of state-level licensure for social workers.

Licensure's primary purpose is to protect vulnerable populations from the ethical misconduct that may otherwise occur in the rendering of care while ensuring some measure of accountability for the conduct of social work practitioners (Donaldson et al., 2014). However, the intention of professional licensure in its current form cannot necessarily be safe-guarded against efforts to co-opt it as there is currently no federal mandate on social work licensure—the absence of which tasks state licensing regulatory boards with its administration (Donaldson et al., 2014). Consequently, state licensing regulatory boards are still, in part, beholden to the laws governing their respective region—which potentially include enforcement of anti-trans laws (e.g., bans on TGE youth access to gender affirming

health care) that remain both harmful to the mental health and wellbeing of TGE people, as well as antithetical to social work ethics and standards of practice.

Social Work Practice and Supervision

Despite the social work profession's explicit commitment to social justice as enshrined in the Code of Ethics, it is not impervious to the perpetuation of heteronormative, homophobic, and transphobic values and behaviors which manifest in discriminatory actions in research, education, and practice (Witt & Medina-Martinez, 2022). Research suggests TGE clients face discrimination, harassment, and a lack of cultural humility from social workers in both healthcare and social service settings (Burdge, 2007; Kattari et al., 2017; Kcomt, 2019; Moe & Sparkman, 2015). A systematic review found that more than half of all TGE individuals reported discrimination or abuse from health care providers (Kcomt, 2019). The lack of specialized education and anti-TGE biases contribute to the perpetuation of heteronormative, transphobic behaviors occurring in social work practice. Social work practice with TGE individuals and communities is also compromised by the personal beliefs of social workers. Strong personal values and beliefs which may conflict with the social work profession contributes to the lack of culturally responsive practice with LGBTQ clients (Dessel et al., 2017; Sherwood, 2017). The lack of clear guidance from national professional associations related to culturally responsive practice with TGE individuals and communities exacerbates disparate treatment of TGE individuals and communities by social workers.

Social work students who plan to seek licensure must overcome significant obstacles if their practice interests center on supporting and advocating on behalf of TGE people. Not only will they face the exclusion of trans-related curricular content, but they must learn in an environment that condones this exclusion (Austin et al., 2019). Additionally, rising as well as seasoned TGE social workers must routinely confront barriers posed by unsupportive or even hostile practice environments, and are frequently saddled with the extra burden of teaching and modeling trans-affirming practices for their colleagues and even supervisors (Austin et al., 2019; Messinger et al., 2020). Such burdens and harms often take place

without recourse and accountability. Even within a profession that prioritizes the ethical concept of cultural humility, the presence and participation of TGE individuals are not routinely considered within our own workforce.

Furthermore, supervision itself is critical in the preparation for independent practice and for ongoing consultative support to guard against the moral distress that routinely arises from working with populations facing multiple forms of oppressive adversity, the number of social work specific clinical supervisors effectively versed in trans-affirming care remains limited despite the growing demand for this level of professional support (Dorn-Medeiros & Christensen, 2019; Luke & Goodrich, 2013; Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). Even though there is limited extant research, one study found using a group supervision model improved the cultural responsiveness of school counselors (Luke & Goodrich, 2013).

The overall structure and organization of the social work profession also impedes upon its ability to create and implement clinical and macro standards of practice across settings that consistently center and uplift TGE people. This occurs, in part, because of a lack of trans-affirming content in social work education and variable and fragmented state licensure standards. This dynamic interplay exists within the context of a larger national anti-trans movement that is directly aimed at the erasure of TGE people's human rights and civil liberties.

Policy Setting Role

Organized social work has a long history of affecting social change. Those enamored with the field's social justice reputation highlight examples of such impact, like the establishment of the Children's Bureau, the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921 and related national decreases in infant mortality (Almgren et al., 2000). Those more critical of the field highlight social work's "violent history of benevolence" and self-interested actions, like providing the testimonial foundation for *Buck v Bell* (the Supreme Court decision that upheld forced sterilization) and advocating for Affordable Care Act reimbursement for psychotherapeutic interventions delivered by social workers (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Stoesz, 2022). Whether acting as the country's moral conscience or a self-promoting cartel, social work clearly has a history of affecting change.

The idea that social work can affect change continues contemporarily. In 2016, the AASWSW put forth a set of goals for the profession of social work known as the “grand challenges” (AASWSW, 2021). These 12 challenges range from “closing the health gap” to “ending racism,” clearly endorsing the notion that, when organized, the profession can do great things. With over 650,000 practicing social workers nationally (Salsberg et al., 2017), the profession’s sheer size provides further support for its potential to enact significant forms of social change.

Still, despite the expressed desire for solving grand challenges and the capacity to do so, the profession lacks a clear commitment to or agenda for advancing trans-affirming policies. Statements against policies that harm TGE individuals have been made at local levels (see National Association of Social Workers Texas Chapter, 2021) and, often with delay, at a national level (see, e.g., NASW’s condemnation of the classification of gender-affirming care as child abuse; NASW, 2022b). However, advocacy efforts have been largely ad hoc, reactive, and disconnected across professional organizations.

As a trans law scholar and activist, Dean Spade offers some insights on the direction the social work profession might take (or avoid) in policy advocacy. Spade highlights the limits of a rights-based framework, which rests on the “discrimination principle” and seeks to protect rights along a single axis of identity (Spade, 2013). According to Spade, laws enacted based on this framework tend to protect the interests of the dominant members of any given identity group. By establishing who gets a right, the framework also reinforces normative categories of identity, which are then used for continued minoritization of subgroups. Further, legal procedures for protecting rights reinforce the idea that discrimination occurs solely through individual, contemporaneous, observable actions (Spade, 2013). In our view, social work must avoid the trappings of rights-based frameworks, while also recognizing the urgency of blocking policies that explicitly aim to harm TGE people and promoting legislation that prevents such policies from being actionable. As such, in our recommendations below, we highlight policies that invoke the discrimination principle and single-axis analyses, with two caveats; first, most of these policies are explicitly targeting TGE and we are recommending their elimination; and secondly, though not the focus of our discussion, we view policies that aim to

create greater social, economic, and health equity for all people as trans-affirming policies worthy of advocacy efforts.

Recommendations to Support TGE Individuals and Communities

Grounded in the Code of Ethics and the value of social justice, we offer recommendations related to areas of concern previously outlined, including the synergy of the national professional organizations within social work, social work education, licensure and professional development/supervision, and policy practice (see Table 1 for summary). These recommendations are framed using an anti-oppressive orientation, recognize the ways in which sociopolitical forces harm TGE individuals, seek to dismantle those forces, and center and affirm the value and human rights of TGE individuals and communities. In doing so, these recommendations support a vision of a social work profession that affirms the value and human rights of TGE individuals and communities. It is important to also note that while not the guiding lens of the recommendations, we uplift intersectionality as an example of an anti-oppressive framework for social work practice, policy, and research.

Table 1. Summary of recommendations to support TGE individuals and communities.

Area of Policy Recommendation	Recommendations
National Organization Structure	<p>ASWB should align examination procedures and questions with the CSWE EPAS.</p> <p>All guiding organizations should coordinate efforts for addressing TGE bias and step outside of their institutional silos.</p>
Accreditation and Curriculum	<p>CSWE should ensure social work programs have non-discrimination policies with enumerated protections and support for TGE students, faculty, and staff.</p> <p>As part of the CSWE affirmation process, programs should be required to include explicit non-discrimination policies and practices – with specific statement inclusive of TGE identity.</p> <p>CSWE should mandate all institutions, including religiously affiliated institutions, demonstrate compliance with the requirement of non-discrimination policies for TGE students, faculty, and staff.</p> <p>Resources, including curricular resources, related to AEDI should be developed, including content on TGE people and communities.</p>
Licensure and Supervision	<p>A national effort to address the co-opting of state-level licensing boards to harm TGE people, especially young people, should be launched.</p> <p>Training should be made available for cisgender supervisors how best to support practitioners in training who may be TGE.</p> <p>Specific TGE affirming competencies in professional practice should be prioritized in clinical supervision.</p>
Policy Practice	<p>A national trans affirming policy agenda should be set by our guiding organizations to move TGE inclusion forward in a meaningful way that includes TGE at the decision-making table.</p> <p>Our organizing bodies should look to and collaborate with TGE-led organization who are leading the work.</p> <p>We suggest that all social work national and state level chapters, at organizing entities like NASW, prioritize and resource advocacy efforts related TGE policies that direct their membership to TGE specific organizations and mobilization opportunities, so advocates and emergent allies can be easily navigated to advocate directly with their state and national representatives</p>

National Organization Structure

Each of the five national organizations outlined previously actively play a role in shaping the social work profession and these bodies have a duty to collaborate to affirm the value of TGE individuals and communities and support their human rights. In recent years, several of these organizations have cooperated to strengthen the profession such as ASWB and CSWE developing strategies to align the EPAS and licensure examination questions (Apgar & Luquet, 2022). Furthermore, the individual organizations have developed statements related to TGE discrimination and strategies for addressing biases, yet these often occur in silos. We recommend coordinated efforts to affirm TGE individuals and communities, including those within the field of social work, ensuring a unified message about the importance of social workers affirming TGE individuals and communities and supporting the human rights of TGE individuals and communities using an anti-oppressive lens which centers TGE communities, particularly those from intersectionally marginalized groups.

Accreditation and Curriculum

To develop social workers who can engage in culturally responsive social work practice with TGE clients, we recommend changes in the practice of assessing social work programs both in candidacy and ongoing reaffirmation. These recommendations directly address concerns about the environment of social work programs for TGE students, faculty, and staff, and the curriculum of programs to prepare students to practice in a culturally responsive manner with TGE clients.

CSWE should ensure social work programs have non-discrimination policies with enumerated protections and support for TGE students, faculty, and staff. In the documentation provided to CSWE during the accreditation and reaffirmation process, programs should provide evidence of their explicit non-discrimination policies and practices to support and affirm TGE students, faculty, and staff. Furthermore, programs should outline how these policies directly support and affirm TGE students, faculty, and staff, and define sanctions for violation of these policies.

CSWE should require all institutions, including religiously affiliated institutions, demonstrate compliance with the requirement of non-discrimination policies for TGE students, faculty, and staff. Furthermore, the requirement should ensure all institutions with social work programs uphold all social work values as outlined by the Code of Ethics, especially the profession's commitment to social justice. While CSWE does not have the authority to dictate to institutions of higher education the adherence to the Code of Ethics, they can strip accreditation from schools who fail to meet the requirements. In terms of implementation, CSWE could review the institution's policies and procedures and compare them to the alignment of the Code of Ethics. Furthermore, when programs apply for accreditation, the standards can be given to institutions of higher education to ensure they are aware of these policies and requirements for adherence to the Code of Ethics.

With the introduction of ADEI to the 2022 EPAS, CSWE should provide additional guidance outlining the requirement of ADEI content infusion across the program curriculum, including course content on TGE populations. For example, CSOGIE (Austin et al., 2016) developed educational resources on course content which can be infused across both the explicit and implicit curriculum. For instance, programs could be instructed to create activities and practice examples of what culturally responsive engagement with TGE communities look like and then providing these examples across course content areas (i.e., in foundational courses, advance practice courses, policy courses, and research courses) instead of only being covered in one or two courses. This type of delivery offers the ability to reinforce the skill of engagement in a variety of practice areas. These resources should be part of the guidance provided to programs to satisfy the infusion of AEDI across the program.

Licensure and Supervision

As previously discussed, state-led efforts to weaponize social work licensure are a direct result of a highly organized movement targeting trans people and their rights (Carlisle, 2022). This larger movement has fueled the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation that seeks to conflate trans-affirming care as harmful to children. Social work centers the protection of oppressed groups

and thus is uniquely impacted by the multifaceted harms prompted by both discriminatory laws and unchecked inflammatory rhetoric. Social work practitioners are vulnerable to being complicit in committing these harms because they are neither versed nor trained in supporting and advocating on behalf of TGE children and adults leaving them susceptible to disinformation campaigns that seek to discredit the existence of TGE identities.

Social workers tasked with responding to calls alleging “child abuse,” for instance, still possess autonomy and discernment in the evaluation of risk within the context of family and support systems. Furthermore, social workers employed by state-based licensing boards who are tasked with responding to allegations of child abuse are equally in need of professional preparation and strengths-based training pertaining to TGE populations. Ultimately, the outcomes of such dynamic interactions between social workers in the field and social workers operating on behalf of state-based boards are too influenced by their collective professional training and preparation and their awareness of critical tenets of ethical practice relevant to TGE populations.

The lack of systematic training and preparation related to supporting and advocating on behalf of TGE individuals is further evidenced in the de-prioritization of trans-affirming competencies in professional practice (Timbers, 2022). If left unchanged such deficiencies in training and preparation specifically pertaining to TGE individuals will continue to shape the educational and mentorship exchanges that transpire within the context of supervision – to include creating the conditions for supervisors to model discriminatory bias toward TGE populations. While cultural humility is embedded conceptually within the Code of Ethics, there remains an opportunity to further codify it as an explicit component of clinical supervision (Howard et al., 2022). Codification of this ethical concept as it pertains to TGE competencies is important in shifting the traditions and educational priorities that exist within clinical supervision.

The immediate cessation of the unrelenting attacks on TGE people remains unlikely. The continuous erosion of the TGE peoples’ rights and freedoms creates a new array of ethical dilemmas that will necessitate clinical supervision and consultation. Thus, there remains a need to equip clinical supervisors not only with training on TGE competencies but also on how to advise, support, and resource

a supervisee who is facing moral distress from bearing witness to the human rights violations of their own transgender client. Furthermore, there remains an equal need to equip supervisors on how to support their clinical supervisee who may themselves be a TGE social worker, and thus experiencing the unique overlapping systemic traumas of being directly harmed by anti-trans laws while attempting to provide support to TGE clientele. Such complex ethical dilemmas necessitate the systematic prioritization of how such dramatic shifts in the socio-political climate will have a direct impact on the way that social workers lead, educate, and advise.

Policy Practice

A trans-affirming policy agenda needs to be set at multiple levels (national and state) and needs to consider process and goals. On a national level, the profession's organizing bodies can begin by issuing aligned and unequivocal position statements and calls to action on behalf of TGE rights and freedoms. These calls should underscore the urgency resultant from what is a growing landscape of human rights violations. Such mobilization efforts would more clearly and transparently outline social workers' ethical obligations to advocate with and on behalf of TGE populations and to especially protect the rights of TGE children; research indicates that advocacy campaigns, whether delivered by TGE or cisgender people, can have lasting trans-affirming impacts (Broockman & Kalla, 2016). Further, commitments to advocacy on behalf of TGE people and communities can combat disinformation campaigns that seek to undermine the irrefutable identities of TGE people and the life-saving care and support that TGE people require.

We further recommend that national social work bodies engage with trans-led organizing efforts to effectively architect these position statements and calls to action. Our profession's valuation of the *lived experience* of those that we serve and those most affected by injustice necessitates that our national and statewide organizing bodies, like NASW, join and/or continue to work in coalition with TGE-led organizations who are already doing essential advocacy work related to TGE causes. Specifically, the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) offers opportunities to contact senators directly, urging the passage of the Equality Act, along with

opportunities to contact state level leaders regarding anti-trans policies—though not all states are included. TGE-led organizations, often decentered in coalition-based advocacy, possess ready-made evidence-based policy recommendations and strategies that both improve access to essential services and opportunities for TGE people. We suggest that all social work national and state level chapters, at organizing entities like NASW, prioritize and resource advocacy efforts related TGE advocacy and direct their membership to TGE specific organizations and mobilization opportunities. Advocates and emergent allies should be able to easily navigate mobilization activities on behalf of TGE people with their state and national representatives. As it relates to levels of advocacy, it may make sense for national organizations (ex: CSWE, NASW) to focus on national level policies, like the Equality Act, which adds protections for TGE people from federal level discrimination in areas such as employment, housing, and within public spaces and services (Equality Act, 2020), with state level chapters focusing on state level policies. Local chapters can look to the Texas chapter of the NASW as an exemplar, which has several resources to guide advocacy that not only share the chapter's role in policy advocacy related to TGE policy inclusion but offer ways for practitioners to participate in advocacy as well.

In terms of the process through which the social work profession develops and refines its advocacy strategy, we recommend that there be representation of TGE scholars and practitioners. In addition, all national organizing bodies have a role to play in acknowledging the contributions of TGE social work scholars and practitioners. For example, the AASWSW inducts social work scholars as fellows annually. Of the almost 200 AASWSW fellows that have been named, very few conduct research focused on TGE individuals or communities. Research is an essential component to the development of standards of practice and policy formation, and thus TGE-specific and especially TGE-led research should be substantively resourced and recognized if our profession is to meet the urgent needs of TGE people.

Lastly, internal policies are just as important as external policy advocacy. We recommend the national organizations develop internal policies which affirm and support the lives of TGE—and communities. These policies should include ensuring access to public

facilities, adequate health care coverage and protections, and human resources policies which affirm individual's identities. In recent years, national social work organizations have come under fire due to the geographic locations of their meetings and conferences; hosting these events in locations with policies not aligned with social work values or the Code of Ethics. We recommend national social work organizations develop policies and procedure to ensure national events, which produce revenue for the host locations, align with the values of social when feasible and when unrealistic develop ways to channel funds to local TGE-led organizations. Specifically, we call on national organizations to stop hosting events in locations that have anti-TGE legislation and policies. When it is not feasible to cease hosting events in these jurisdictions, we urge the social work organizations to work with local grassroots TGE organizations and leaders in providing funding opportunities, coordinated advocacy, and policy campaigns to both support the visibility of TGE people and to reaffirm the profession's commitment to uplifting the human rights and freedoms of TGE people.

Conclusion

Although social work has clear ethical guidelines through the NASW Code of Ethics and through several other guiding organizations, they, along with social work programs and educators often fail to heed those guidelines and thus perpetuate harm against TGE communities. These harms include a lack of specificity related to ADEI within curriculum, accrediting programs that have harmful policies related to TGE identity, documented discrimination from TGE students in accredited social work programs, and lack of a clear vision or even a commitment to trans-affirming policies. This commentary offers concrete recommendations using an anti-oppressive orientation which envisions social work as a profession that recognizes the ways in which sociopolitical forces harm TGE individuals, seeks to dismantle those forces, and centers and affirms the value and human rights of TGE individuals and communities in doing so.

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