

The Roles of Forensic Social Work in Caring for Individuals with Serious Mental Illness

! Serious Mental Illness and Criminal and Civil Legal Involvement

Individuals who have serious mental illness (SMI) are over-represented in the criminal legal system and may also be involved in civil legal systems, including civil commitments and guardianship petitions. One study found that about 1 in 4 individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder in a public mental health system had been involved in the criminal system (Swanson et al., 2013). Another study found that their risk for arrest was highest for lower-level misdemeanor charges (Fisher et al., 2011). It is also well established that individuals who have SMI are more often victims of crime than they are engaged in violence. Many individuals with SMI have vulnerabilities such as co-occurring substance use disorders, trauma histories, and social factors such as race, poverty and education levels that often lead to disparate care and can negatively influence health outcomes.



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Criminal and correctional settings are required to provide care but often vary in their approaches. These settings are not designed to be treatment delivery systems. However, individuals who have SMI often move between these settings, the forensic system, and clinical settings. Well-trained clinicians in these environments are desperately needed and can provide important services to help people in need.

Social workers in forensic settings play an important role in helping individuals who have SMI navigate these complex systems. They are specialists in getting resources to people who need them. With expertise in active listening and providing support, social workers are well positioned to facilitate better outcomes. Forensic social work is a field that focuses on contexts that involve criminal courts, correctional settings, and other carceral settings. This brief resource provides information about some of the current types of work that forensic social workers engage in. Information about other disciplines in correctional settings, such as [forensic nursing](#), are also available through SMI Adviser.



Mission of the National Association of Social Workers

The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values. These core values, embraced by social workers throughout the profession's history, are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective:

- ➔ Service
- ➔ Social Justice
- ➔ Dignity and Worth of the Person
- ➔ Importance of Human Relationships
- ➔ Integrity
- ➔ Competence

Social workers in carceral settings play a vital role in providing services to people who have SMI. Individuals in these settings need human relationships to thrive and recover. They deserve to be treated with dignity.

Forensic Settings Where Social Workers are Critical

- ➔ Correctional settings
- ➔ Probation and/or parole settings
- ➔ Crisis mobilization units
- ➔ Mental health and/or substance abuse courts

Expertise Provided by Social Workers in Forensic Settings

Mental health assessments and consultation in criminal and civil courts

Forensic social workers conduct assessments and evaluations, offer recommendations, and provide testimony that can assist both criminal and civil courts in several areas. This includes guardianship, civil commitment, competency to stand trial, custody, mediation, and reunification proceedings.

Competency restoration

Forensic social workers assist in competency to stand trial restoration treatment to help people who have SMI attain competency and return to court. They also work with individuals who have been adjudicated Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity (NGRI). Here, the primary goal is to help individuals who have SMI achieve remission or stabilization of illness, increase treatment adherence and/or adaptive coping with appropriate supports, and to discharge to the most appropriate setting that can help to sufficiently mitigate risk.

Treatment plans and psychotherapy

Forensic social workers develop treatment plans and, when indicated, provide individual, couple, group, and family therapy.

Family services

Forensic social workers can provide assistance in child custody, abuse, juvenile justice, or divorce proceedings. They can be essential to identify family dynamics, provide education and recommendations, and link to resources that can aid the individual and family network.

Discharge planning and leveraging community supports

Forensic social workers assess needs, coordinate care, and advocate for resources to ensure a smoother and more successful reintegration process.

Victim advocacy

Forensic social workers work with victims of crime to help individuals better understand their rights and assist them in navigating the legal system. They can be valuable members of legal teams that assist legal counsel by serving as an advocate for the defendant and identifying mitigating factors for sentencing. They advocate for social justice and equal access to services.

Rehabilitation and reintegration

Forensic social workers support recovery through their efforts around discharge planning and leveraging community resources. They play a vital role in promoting successful reintegration for individuals who transition from institutional settings back into the community.

Screening, evaluation and treatment of law enforcement and other criminal justice personnel

Forensic social workers provide valuable services to law enforcement and criminal justice personnel. These services can help to promote the mental health and well-being of these individuals, as well as to reduce the risk of misconduct and burnout.

Barriers and Challenges in Forensic Social Work

Forensic social workers often face the dual role of being both forensic evaluator as well as treatment provider. It is very important to have clear boundaries and be cognizant of which role they represent in each situation. They also work in adversarial environments with individuals who may be court mandated for treatment or evaluation that may result in negative consequences. This can often challenge a social worker's core values and commitment to social justice. Forensic social workers may experience burnout, secondary trauma, or compassion fatigue. Their work can be intense. They may witness violence and will be involved processing legal charges, hearing accounts of abuse or violence, and assisting individuals to help process trauma. They are often trying to navigate systems that are already overburdened and have limited resources. It is imperative to utilize supervision, leverage supports, and practice self-care.

Conclusion

Forensic social workers have pivotal roles in the care of people who have SMI. These mental health professionals have special expertise not just in social work, but also in working with people who have been involved in criminal legal contexts. They can use their expertise to inform systems that they work in and help bring issues of family and community systems into the foreground of treatment.

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