

Virginia Board of Social Work

Guidance Document on the Practice of Conversion Therapy

For the purposes of this guidance "conversion therapy" or "sexual orientation change efforts" is defined as any practice or treatment that seeks to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity, including efforts to change behaviors or gender expressions or to eliminate or reduce sexual or romantic attractions or feelings toward individuals of any gender. "Conversion therapy" does not include social work services that provide assistance to a person undergoing gender transition or provide acceptance, support, and understanding of a person or facilitate a person's coping, social support, and identity exploration and development, including sexual-orientation-neutral interventions to prevent or address unlawful conduct or unsafe sexual practices, as long as such services do not seek to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity in any direction.

In 18VAC140-20-150 of the Regulations Governing the Practice of Social Work, the Virginia Board of Social Work ("Board") has stated that: *"The protection of the public health, safety, and welfare and the best interest of the public shall be the primary guide in determining the appropriate professional conduct of all persons whose activities are regulated by the board. Regardless of the delivery method, whether in person, by telephone, or electronically, these standards shall apply to the practice of social work."*

In 18VAC140-20-160 (Grounds for disciplinary action or denial of issuance of a license or registration), it is stated that "(t)he board may refuse to admit an applicant to an examination; refuse to issue a license or registration to an applicant; or reprimand, impose a monetary penalty, place on probation, impose such terms as it may designate, suspend for a stated period of time or indefinitely, or revoke a license or registration for one or more of the following grounds:...

3. Conducting one's practice in such a manner so as to make the practice a danger to the health and welfare of one's clients or to the public..."

Many national behavioral health and medical associations have issued position and policy statements regarding conversion therapy/sexual orientation change efforts, especially with minors. Such statements have typically noted that conversion therapy has not been shown to be effective or safe. In its Position Statement on "Sexual Orientation Change Efforts ("SOCE") and Conversion Therapy," published in May 2015, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has stated that: "The practice of SOCE violates the very tenets of the social work profession as outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics."

In a similar statement regarding conversion/reparative therapy, the Virginia Chapter of NASW stated that "Conversion therapy has been discredited and highly criticized by all major medical, psychiatric, psychologic and professional mental health organizations, including the National Association of Social Workers. Data demonstrated that conversion therapy negatively impacts the mental health and self-esteem of the individual. The NASW Virginia strongly asserts its

stance against therapies and treatments designed to change sexual orientation or gender identity and against referring clients to practitioners or programs that claim to do so.”

Consistent with the established position of the NASW, the Board considers “conversion therapy” or “sexual orientation change efforts” (as defined above) to be services that have the potential to be a danger to clients, especially minors. Thus, under regulations governing practitioners licensed or registered by the Board, practicing conversion therapy/sexual orientation change efforts with minors could result in a finding of misconduct and disciplinary action against the licensee or registrant.