

Bethel College Social Work 50th Anniversary Welcome & Statement

Good afternoon, for those who may not know me, my name is Jennifer Chappell Deckert and I am the Chair of the Social Work Department at Bethel College. Welcome, to all the alumni, friends, supporters, challengers, and students in the room. We are so grateful you are here to celebrate with us.

1974 was a big year for social work in the State of Kansas. It was the first year that we instituted social work licenses through the Behavioral Sciences Regulatory Board. It was the first year of our state chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. And it was the first year that Bethel College social work became accredited and graduated six students with a social work degree. I am grateful that the beginnings of our program aligned with an overall movement in the history of social work in Kansas that indicated a commitment to quality services through professional licensure and continued education.

Since that first class, we have graduate more than 500 social work majors, and they are employed in social work agencies and communities all over the state, country, and even in different parts of the world. They are the hope-builders, dignity-preservers, and anti-racist changemakers that have created waves of support and accompaniment to so many. They really have changed the world.

Our social work program is held together by the following values:

1. An ethic of discipleship that calls the social worker to be a compassionate presence in solidarity with marginalized people;
2. An ethic of scholarship that calls the social worker to strive for continued excellence in social work practice through intellectual curiosity and scientific critical inquiry
3. An ethic of service that calls the social worker to elevate service to others above self-interest and to address social problems while assisting those in need;
4. An ethic of integrity that is the foundation for holistic personal and professional relationships.
5. An ethic of community that prizes social connectivity and inclusion;
6. An ethic of peace and social justice that calls social workers to work for human rights and global and societal peace through challenging social injustice and bringing empowerment in the face of oppression;
7. An ethic of diversity that is committed to anti-oppressive practice, and respects the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, keeping in mind the unique intersectionality of gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, religion, ability, race, and other individual or group differences.

We teach these values and embody them in our various practice settings. And when there is a violation of these values, we are also required to name the violation, recognize the harm that was caused, and do what we can to create repair.

We cannot hold this celebration without recognizing that our social work program has participated in the violation of these core values and caused harm. Our two earliest professors (who are listed in our faculty timeline) were involved in what was reported as the worst mental health abuse case in the State of Kansas: The Kaufman House Residential Treatment Center. As social workers who care deeply about dignity, hope, and justice, these harms cannot go unspoken. We want to acknowledge the individuals and families who were impacted by this harm, and we want to say that **we are deeply and sincerely sorry** for all of the ways the Bethel College Social Work Program participated, and was complicit about the two-decade period of abuse that occurred right in the midst of our community and the silence that followed.

We know that some of our social work graduates grew to know, trust, and rely on these first professors. They were mentored by them. Many of them became social workers in the community who then referred clients to them, or may have done other things to elevate the expertise and status of their former instructors. There was a community-wide social service scaffolding of trust, reputation, and networking that helped maintain and sustain the control and abuse of power of the most vulnerable members of our community who lived in the Kaufman House (those with severe and persistent mental illnesses). This scaffolding of abuse remains largely unseen and unrecognized, even today. We want to take responsibility for our role in that structure, and we want to apologize for the ways we know our graduates contributed to this abuse, and for the ways we don't know that they contributed. It is time for that scaffolding to fall.

We know that many of us in the community (social workers, clergy, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.) did not give primacy to the voices of those most impacted by this horrific abuse, which is fundamentally against our core values as helpers and social workers. Starting where the person is, believing the person, honoring and elevating their voice, and standing with them in the face of injustice--- those are the fundamental social work practices that we failed through our silence, our critique, and our passivity.

We are absolutely committed to educating social workers about the ways that this kind of abuse has happened, could happen, and may happen in the future. We will never forget the paternalism and power that contributed to this harm, all that happened at the Kaufman House and after, or the ripples of abuse through re-traumatization and a lack of acknowledgment, even denial that caused and continue to cause so much more pain and suffering.

We will continue to teach students this story, to warn them of ways that power can get abused in our profession, and to continue to listen to survivors or sufferers who have been hurt by our profession, directly and indirectly. We will require that our students read and study works by and from people who are vulnerable and have lived experience (like the disability activists taught us: "Nothing about us without us"). We will help students to know the value of these voices as the real experts of experience and human behavior. We will remind them that self-determination, participation, and solidarity should be prioritized over status and authority. When we know better, we will do better.

As a sign of this commitment we are excited to announce a call for a commemorative piece of art that will be visible to everyone visiting campus, and will commemorate our 50 years of social work education. We want this piece to represent healing and hope, for the survivors of Kaufman House, and also for anyone who has been harmed by toxic power-based or colonized violence through the direct or indirect actions of our profession. You will see there are descriptions for this call for artwork around the tables. Please share them with your networks and help us recruit some strong artist candidates for creating a piece that will be displayed outside our building. We have invited Nancy, a Peer Support Specialist and Kaufman house survivor to help us select this piece, and to speak at the unveiling in the Fall of 2026. We look forward to you returning for that event.

Thank you for coming to our reception, and we hope you enjoy connecting with others. Please be sure to take photos and participate in our interactive stations, where we hope to get your input and advice. We deeply appreciate your support.

Please take time to look at our student slide show, enjoy some cookies, and visit the various stations around the room. In a few minutes, we will open up for some sharing of stories and memories from alumni.