

A PUBLICATION FROM
THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK

INSIGHT

SPRING 2026



Graduate College of Social Work
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



A message from Dr. Yarneccia D. Dyson, Dean of the Graduate College of Social Work

The past year has been both a reflection of who we are and a powerful indicator of where we are headed as a college. As I conclude my first year serving as Dean of the Graduate College of Social Work, I am deeply proud of the momentum we are building together—momentum grounded in our values, strengthened by our community, and guided by a shared commitment to impact.

Our college continues to be recognized for excellence, leadership, and meaningful contributions to the social work profession. Being named Organization of the Year by the National Association of Social Workers–Texas Houston Branch is a testament to the collective efforts of our faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community partners who advance the mission of social work each day. These achievements affirm not only the quality of our work, but also the purpose that drives it.

At the heart of our success is our unwavering commitment to preparing students for leadership and service. This year, our students engaged in policy and advocacy at the highest levels through opportunities such as the Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy (CRISP), Social Work Advocacy Day (SWAD), and our inaugural Spring Forum—spaces designed for dialogue, transparency, and meaningful connection across our community. These experiences reflect our belief that education must be both rigorous and responsive to the needs of the world around us.

They also reiterate the importance of community and the value of collectivism in working together to respond to the critical needs around us.

The success of UH Giving Day, the extraordinary support of our students through the Caroline M. Garcia Scholarship—A newly established scholarship created by our Young Alumni Donor, Caroline M. Garcia—the creation of a transformational endowment by IntraCare, and the continued growth of our community engagement efforts all underscore a shared investment in our students and in the future of the communities we serve.

Our Charting Our Path to Excellence (COPE) Strategic Plan serves as a living roadmap—aligning our priorities, strengthening our pillars of distinction, and positioning the GCSW to lead with innovation, relevance, and purpose in an evolving social landscape.

It is truly an honor to lead this exceptional college during such a pivotal time. Together, we are charting a future defined by impact, excellence, and possibility—building on our history while shaping what the next generation of social work leadership will look like.

Within **INSIGHT**, you will find the stories, scholarship, and impact that define our college at this moment in time. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all who made this publication possible and to those whose continued commitment ensures that our future remains one of purpose, excellence, and possibility. May we always remember to **Lift As We Climb!**

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Yarneccia D. Dyson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Yarneccia D. Dyson, PhD, MSW
Dean and Maconda Brown O'Connor
Endowed Dean's Chair
Graduate College of Social Work

02

INSIDE THE GCSW
Message from the Dean

08

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

14

RESEARCH & PHILANTHROPIC IMPACT

18

STUDENT STORIES
Practice in Purpose
Honors and Doctoral Achievements
Evidence of Excellence

36

ALUMNI ILLUMINATION



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About

INSight is a Spring publication produced by the Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW). This publication serves as a captivating showcase, spotlighting the remarkable achievements and contributions of our students, esteemed alumni, and dedicated faculty and staff members. Join us on a journey through the pages of “INSight” as we celebrate the Interdisciplinary talents and impactful endeavors that define the vibrant community within the GCSW.

Editor’s Note

As we strive for excellence in our publication, we recognize the importance of maintaining accuracy and clarity in all our content. However, we understand that despite our best efforts, typos and errors may occasionally slip through the cracks. If you come across any typos, errors, or inconsistencies within our publication, we encourage you to report them to us promptly via gcswnews@uh.edu.

GCSW BY THE NUMBERS

\$64K ‘25 MSW salary average	340 <i>*est.</i> Students started practicum placements in the Fall ‘25 semester	255 ‘25-’26 MSW Graduates	291K Number of practicum hours contributed to the greater Houston area and beyond
SPRING 2026 271 First-year Ph.D. and MSW student enrollment	72 Number of CEU opportunities offered	225 <i>*est.</i> Practicum sites	
380 Students in practicum placements	SPRING 2026 160 Generalist practicum placements	51 Cumulative conference presentations (Faculty, Staff, & Students)	
\$16M+ Average wages earned by new GCSW MSWs	180 Concentration practicum placements	5 ‘25-’26 Ph.D. Graduates	60 Active MSW + community career development connections

ORGANIZATION OF THE YEAR



University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work Named Organization of the Year

We are proud to share that the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) was named **Organization of the Year** at the recent National Association of Social Workers Texas Chapter Houston (NASW-TX) Social Workers' Gala.

As the leading professional organization for social workers in Texas, NASW-TX advances the profession through advocacy, ethical standards, continuing education, and the promotion of policies that strengthen individuals, families, and communities. Its annual awards recognize individuals and organizations whose work reflects the highest ideals of social work practice and a sustained commitment to social justice, service, and community impact.

The Organization of the Year Award honors institutions that exemplify these values through meaningful contributions to the field. GCSW's recognition reflects its leadership in preparing practice-ready professionals, advancing innovative research, and building strong community partnerships that address complex social challenges across Houston and beyond.

The award was accepted by Dean Yarneccia D. Dyson, alongside students, faculty, staff, and alumni—underscoring the collective effort that defines the College's impact. In addition, Ann Liberman, Director of Alumni and Career Services, was honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award, recognizing her enduring contributions to the profession.

"These recognitions reflect both the collective strength of our GCSW community and the enduring contributions of leaders like Ann Liberman, whose impact continues to shape and elevate our profession. As we look to the future, the Graduate College of Social Work remains steadfast in our commitment to advancing social work education, strengthening the workforce, and driving meaningful, sustained impact across the communities we serve. It is an honor to lead and serve alongside a community so deeply committed to excellence, purpose, and progress." - GCSW Dean, Dr. Yarneccia D. Dyson

Together, these honors affirm GCSW's role as a leader in social work education and practice, and its continued commitment to advancing excellence and equity in the communities it serves.



(Photo Caption: Ann London Liberman accepting Lifetime Achievement Award)

Leadership in ACTION

Recognizing and taking pride in the commendable accomplishments of our faculty, staff, and GCSW scholars brings immense joy to the entire GCSW community. We are delighted to spotlight their awards and honors in this section.

GCSW Students Receive Prestigious CSWE Minority Fellowship Program Award

MSW student Elisabeth Adams and doctoral students Marcus Brown, MSW, LCSW-S, and Chelsea Sanchez, BSW, MSW, LCSW-S—have been selected for the 2025–2026 CSWE Minority Fellowship Program (MFP). This **highly competitive award** supports the mission of advancing behavioral health equity by preparing social workers to serve underrepresented and underserved communities affected by mental health and substance use challenges.

Elisabeth Adams, an MSW student and research assistant with the Child Welfare Education Project (CWEP), describes the award as an opportunity to deepen her work with underserved communities and advance her goal of becoming a licensed clinical social worker and future doctoral student. Inspired by early experiences in behavioral health settings, Elisabeth is committed to integrating research and practice to expand culturally responsive care.

Doctoral student Marcus Brown shared that receiving the fellowship is both an honor and a catalyst for growth. As a first-generation college student, his academic journey was shaped by early exposure to research and a commitment to addressing mental health disparities. His work focuses on improving behavioral health outcomes for Black adults through culturally relevant research, teaching, and community engagement. Marcus aims to amplify lived experiences in scholarship and contribute to more equitable and effective mental health systems.

Two-time MFP recipient, Chelsea Sanchez describes her experience as transformative. Through national convenings and professional development opportunities, she has built meaningful collaborations in trauma and mental health research.

“This honor reflects our student’s dedication to addressing the intersection of mental health and substance use in underserved populations.”
- GCSW Dean, Dr. Yarneccia D. Dyson

Together, these scholars exemplify the GCSW’s mission to advance social justice, expand access to care, and prepare leaders who will shape the future of social work.

25-26

CSWE Minority Fellowship Program (MFP) Award



Elisabeth Adams



Marcus Brown



Chelsea Sanchez

Honoring shared moments of recognition and excellence across the GCSW through the lens of our esteemed faculty and staff.



Dr. Samira Ali was inducted into the 2026 class of Fellows of the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR). The SSWR Fellowship honors and recognizes current SSWR members for their individual accomplishments, leadership, and contributions to SSWR as a scientific society. SSWR Fellows are members who have served with distinction to advance the mission of the Society – to advance, disseminate, and translate research that addresses issues of social work practice and policy and promotes a diverse, equitable, and just society.



Cindy Carter, LCSW, was accepted into the 2026-2027 Council of Social Work Excellence (CSWE) Teaching Academy. This one-year program will enhance the teaching skills and techniques for faculty members in the social work field. This includes practices in curriculum design, student engagement, and inclusive pedagogy.



Ann Liberman, Director of Alumni and Career Services, was honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award at the NASW-TX Houston Social Workers' Gala. This award recognizes social workers whose career-long contributions have made a lasting impact on the field.



Dr. Jodi Berger Cardoso has been appointed Cluster Chair for the Immigrants & Refugees (I&R) cluster, while **Dr. Edward D. Scott Jr.** will serve as Cluster Chair for Black and African Diaspora Focused Research (BADFR). This competitive, multi-year appointment recognizes their scholarly excellence, subject-matter expertise, and significant contributions to advancing social work research. In these roles, they will help shape the intellectual direction of the conference by guiding key research conversations, elevating the quality of scholarship, and fostering collaboration across the field.



Dr. Yarneccia D. Dyson has been elected to serve as a Board Member for NADD, for a three-year term. In this role, Dr. Dyson will contribute to the development of intentional programming and communities of practice designed for deans, directors, and department chairs nationwide. She is particularly excited to help refine leadership and mentoring initiatives for doctoral students aspiring to administrative roles within the academy.

In a complementary honor, **Dr. Quenette Walton** has been selected to participate in NADD's Next Level Leaders in Social Work Education Program, formerly known as the Future Leaders Program. This competitive, national initiative supports social work educators as they explore and transition into senior leadership roles, equipping participants with the mentorship, tools, and peer network needed to shape the future of the field.

Advancing Leadership With Intention

This semester, members of the **Dean's Executive Team** attended Next-Level Leadership: An Institute for Women Leaders. This two-day experience invited women leaders from across higher education to engage in work that was both deeply personal and systemically grounded, with a focus on strengthening leadership identity, expanding networks, and navigating the complexities of leadership in today's academic landscape.

The conference combined workshops, small-group discussions, and interactive sessions designed to build self-awareness, foster connection, and translate insight into action. A central component of the experience was the Five Paths to Leadership® framework, which explores five leadership styles—and emphasizes leadership as a dynamic practice shaped through reflection, feedback, and lived experience. Participants examined both the strengths and challenges associated with each style, gaining a more nuanced understanding of their leadership tendencies.

Sessions throughout the conference emphasized the importance of self-awareness, effective communication, and intentional leadership. Participants explored strategies for navigating difficult conversations, addressing imposter syndrome, and remaining grounded amid the evolving demands of higher education. Conversations also centered on intersectional leadership, highlighting how identity, power, and systemic structures influence decision-making and leadership effectiveness. These discussions reinforced the importance of leading with intention, courage, and a commitment to equity.



(Photo Caption: From left to right: Quenette Walton, Marsha Wright, Amber Mollhagen, McClain Sampson, Ginger Lucas, Whitney Price, Renia s. Butler)

Through appreciative inquiry and peer dialogue, attendees identified key enablers of leadership success, including collaboration, courage, and activating support systems. Breakout sessions allowed participants to tailor their learning, diving deeper into areas such as effective meeting design, self-awareness practices, and navigating complex leadership challenges. The experience concluded with reflection and integration, encouraging participants to define actionable next steps and embrace leadership as an ongoing, evolving journey.

How UH Students Are Advancing Cognitive Health Through Community Care

When the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work envisions excellence, **Cougar CHAIN** (Cougar Cognitive Health Initiative) is a living example. Launched in 2023 as part of the UH Cougar Initiative to Engage (CITE), CHAIN was designed to do more than teach skills—it was built to transform lives.

Under the advising and leadership of GCSW Associate Professor, Dr. Christina Miyawaki, the initiative aims to improve awareness of cognitive health and Alzheimer's disease within Houston's Vietnamese American community through culturally informed outreach.

"When I joined GCSW in 2015, I found no health data for older Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in Houston. After surveying their health data in 2018 and 2022, and learning how prevalent dementia was, I strongly felt we had to do something about it," says Dr. Miyawaki. "Seeing our students interact with older Vietnamese people in their native language and how proud those elders feel—makes my day."

CHAIN not only introduces and assesses brain health but also goes beyond science, strengthening intergenerational relationships and cultural understanding.

Since its inception, CHAIN has grown to five cohorts and 80+ students, with 44 active members today. With undergraduate and graduate students from health-related disciplines working side by side, gaining real-world experience while serving one of the city's most vulnerable populations. Their work spans health fairs, screenings, and education,

creating a bridge between generations and cultures. For many students, this is more than service—it's personal.

"CHAIN is more than a research project. It's a way to bring compassion and science together," says Nguyen, a research assistant whose own family has been touched by Alzheimer's.

The program's impact is undeniable, providing hands-on learning opportunities for students, expanding access to care for communities, and earning recognition from respected organizations such as Mather Institute and Boat People SOS.



CHAIN received the 2024 Mather Institute Promising Practices Award. This prestigious honor, now in its fourteenth year, celebrates organizations that are reshaping aging services through innovation, sustainability, and replicability. CHAIN stood out among global recipients for its unique approach of pairing college students with older adults in culturally informed outreach—an initiative that bridges generations while promoting cognitive health.

This award-winning program serves as a catalyst for new ideas that enhance the lives of older adults, reinforcing CHAIN's role as a model for excellence and social responsibility. At its core, Cougar CHAIN embodies the spirit of Charting Our Path to Excellence, creating a future where academic excellence and social responsibility intersect.

Sessions at the Stable: How GCSW Students Are at the Forefront of an Emerging Therapeutic Practice

Long before she stepped foot into the Graduate College of Social Work, MSW student Elisabeth Adams had her eye on studying a novel form of therapy – one that incorporated a lifelong love of hers.



(Photo Caption: From left to right: Donna Amtsborg, Beverly Walsh)

“I’ve always loved horses,” she said, “I was considering graduate programs and knew an LMSW who mentioned that the GCSW had a professor that taught **equine-assisted therapy**. I looked up Professor Amtsborg and reached out to her.”

Clinical Associate Professor Donna Amtsborg most certainly had an opportunity for Elisabeth. In the classroom, Donna teaches equine-assisted therapy and supervises students with a passion for animal-assisted treatment. Outside the GCSW, she’s a practitioner at Brookside Ranch, an equine-assisted psychotherapy practice. Every year, she recruits MSW students to complete their practicum on the ranch, offering them the opportunity to observe an innovative, up-and-coming treatment modality.

Donna has practiced animal-assisted work since 1997. She came across the Brookside Ranch in 2014 while seeking out sites for student practicum placements. She met owner Dr. Beverly Walsh and was impressed by the ranch’s forward thinking of equine therapy. “These horses have been together [for about 20 years] and have worked under a model that really focuses on choice and consent.”

The treatment entails several activities but is generally divided into three stages: self-regulation, equine interaction, and debriefing. In the second stage, clients build a relationship with a horse in the pasture while following principles of consent. According to Dr. Walsh, adolescent clients who have anxiety, depression, or ADHD particularly benefit from this treatment because of its empowering nature. “Horses are good at helping us be more self-led. For some people, partnering with a horse can be the first time they’ve ever really experienced a sense of connection with a secure attachment.”

Brookside Ranch currently employs eight providers and 12 horses. Donna, who is one of the eight providers, hopes to keep bringing in GCSW students to complete their independent study at the ranch. Students often seek her out, though she noted, “We’re looking for somebody who has an interest in a unique way of providing therapeutic services. Somebody who has a deep interest in working with animals and individuals.”

It was the perfect placement for second-year student Elisabeth Low, who had experience in canine-assisted therapy prior to starting her MSW program at the GCSW but wanted to venture outside of her comfort zone. “What excited me is being hands-on, being outside of a traditional therapeutic setting, and helping people who aren’t successful in those traditional ways of therapy.”

Fellow practicum intern Elisabeth Adams loved the opportunity of hands-on practice at the ranch.

What she didn’t expect was to learn about herself. While having a frustrating moment with a horse she practiced with, she realized, “I let other people define how I’m feeling as opposed to me being able to stay grounded.”

Both MSW students agree their experience at Brookside Ranch have shaped their post-grad goals. Elisabeth plans to pursue a PhD to research equine-assisted work to fill in existing limitations in related literature. Elizabeth wants to head down the clinical route, focusing on teenagers and their mental health by incorporating animal-assisted therapeutic techniques.

Brookside Ranch is just one of the many opportunities available to MSW students at the GCSW – one that can go from a practicum placement



(Photo Caption: MSW Student, Elisabeth Adams)

to a full-time role. Donna hopes that more students continue to choose the ranch as a launchpad for their careers especially as the treatment is pushed further into the mainstream.



Research & Philanthropic IMPACT

What SEEDS are you PLANTING?

Introducing Dr. McClain Sampson, Associate Dean for Research Impact, Innovation, and Engagement (ADRIIE)



Dr. McClain Sampson has been a dedicated member of the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work (UH GCSW) faculty since 2011, contributing to the advancement of research, education, and community-engaged scholarship. A nationally recognized scholar in maternal and perinatal health, her work examines the social, structural, and policy determinants that shape maternal mental health, morbidity, and mortality, with a strong emphasis on translating research into community-based interventions and systems-level change.

Dr. Sampson has authored more than 30 peer-reviewed publications and secured over \$10 million in external funding to support research and training initiatives that improve outcomes for mothers and families—particularly those from historically underserved communities. Her scholarship is deeply rooted in community collaboration and includes leadership on large-scale initiatives focused on postpartum depression prevention, integrated behavioral health care, workforce development, and maternal health equity, including federally funded programs such as the Healthy Start Initiative. Across these efforts, Dr. Sampson advances solutions that center mothers as whole individuals, strengthen community-based care models, build a culturally responsive health

workforce, and inform policy to improve access, quality, and equity in maternal health care.

An engaged educator and mentor, Dr. Sampson teaches courses in qualitative research methods, integrated behavioral health, and clinical social work practice. She is also a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach for the University of Houston and plays an active role in preparing the next generation of social work scholars and practitioners through mentorship and interdisciplinary collaboration. Her work extends beyond the university through partnerships with organizations such as the Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University, where she has contributed to maternal health policy analysis and public scholarship.

As Associate Dean for **Research Impact, Innovation, and Engagement** (ADRIIE), Dr. Sampson provides strategic leadership to advance the College's research enterprise and cultivate a thriving scholarly community. She leads initiatives that strengthen research capacity, expand interdisciplinary and community-engaged partnerships, and support faculty in securing external funding and amplifying the impact of their work. In 2026, her efforts include expanding research collaborations with UH's College of Medicine, Texas Southern University's MH-REACH Maternal Health Center, and the Humana Integrated Health System Sciences Institute at the University of Houston.

Committed to making research more accessible and actionable, Dr. Sampson also spearheads quarterly workshops designed to demystify and elevate the research process, with topics such as Why Dreaming Is Important for Research, How Strategic Partnerships Lead to Funded Research and Greater Impact, Branding Your Research for Greater Impact, and AI as a Research Assistant. Through her leadership, Dr. Sampson continues to champion research that is rigorous, community-centered, and intentionally designed to reach—and serve—the communities for whom it matters most.

Legacy Investment Boosts Mental Health Education at University of Houston

AS INTRACARE NORTH HOSPITAL CLOSES, IT OPENS OPPORTUNITIES

By Laurie Fickman
(April 06, 2026 — [Health and Medicine](#))

A gift from IntraCare North Hospital **will support mental health education at the UH Graduate College of Social Work** and at the Andy & Barbara Gessner College of Nursing at UH.

In one of its final acts after closing, IntraCare North Hospital has made a \$1.6 million gift to the University of Houston to help prepare the next generation of behavioral health professionals serving communities in Houston and across Texas.



(Photo Caption: 2025 GLOBE orientation)

“This gift reflects a powerful way an organization can extend its impact,” said Russell T. Dunlavy, vice president for advancement and alumni. “It allows the University to carry forward the commitment IntraCare has made through education in ways that will continue to grow over time.”

The gift from IntraCare, a former psychiatric and behavioral health hospital in Houston, will fund new academic expansion and long-term endowed scholarships at both the UH Graduate College of Social Work and the Andy & Barbara Gessner College of Nursing.

“As we close this chapter for IntraCare, our Board felt a deep responsibility to ensure our mission lives on,” said Deo Shanker, former president of IntraCare North Hospital. “This investment reflects our commitment to the communities we have served and to the future professionals who will continue that care.”

The gift comes at a critical time. Texas faces one of the nation’s most severe shortages of behavioral health professionals. According to the Health and Human Services Commission Health Profession Shortage Area maps, 246 out of 254 counties in Texas are designated as mental health professional shortage areas.

Global support of social work

At the Graduate College of Social Work, the gift will establish the IntraCare Behavioral Health Social Work Endowment, providing long term scholarship support for future students entering the field. It will also support the Global Leaders of Behavioral Health Education program, a training program that prepares social workers to provide mental health services in integrated healthcare settings where medical and mental health services are delivered together.



(Photo Caption: From left to right: Stephanie Eisenbaum, Dean Dyson, Amber Mollhagen, Deo Shanker, Valinda McAbee)

“
Since 2025, IntraCare has supported our GLOBE interprofessional behavioral health training program, helping expand the number of social workers delivering behavioral health services across the region. We appreciate their foresight in establishing an endowment that reaches into the future to provide ongoing support as we carry out the mission to train the next generation of social workers and behavioral health professionals.

– GCSW Dean, Dr. Yarneccia D. Dyson

2026

Albert Schweitzer Fellowship Award



Monica Sutton-Bryant
MSW Student

PURPOSE in Practice

At the GCSW, student success is defined not only by achievement, but by purpose, impact, and readiness to lead in an ever-evolving social work landscape. This section highlights how our students bring values to life—through action, scholarship, advocacy, and milestone achievements—while shaping the future of the profession. From **Purpose in Practice**, which spotlights changemakers translating learning into real-world impact across clinical, research, campus, and community settings, to **Honors and Doctoral Achievements**, which celebrates scholarly distinction and leadership, these stories reflect the rigor and promise of social work education. **Evidence of Excellence** honors our graduating students as they prepare to step into their next chapter as alumni, capturing the journeys, voices, and aspirations that define student success at the GCSW and signal what comes next.



From the Texas Capitol to Capitol Hill: Future Social Workers Lead Through Advocacy

At the GCSW, students are honored not only for their academic excellence, but for their leadership, courage, and unwavering commitment to advocacy. As future social workers, they represent the backbone of society—individuals prepared to stand at the intersection of community need and systemic change. Through hands-on advocacy experiences at both the state and national levels, GCSW students demonstrated how their voices, perspectives, and preparation are helping move the needle toward a more just and equitable future.

That commitment was on full display during Social Work Advocacy Day (SWAD) 2026, which brought together social workers from across Texas for a day of education, advocacy, and connection at the UT Lyndon B. Johnson Auditorium and the Texas State Capitol. Guided by the theme “*United in Purpose, Unique in Perspective*,” the event highlighted the collective power of social workers to influence policy while honoring the diverse lived experiences that shape the profession. Students, practitioners, and retired professionals participated in engaging sessions, earned continuing education credits, connected with peers from across the state, and engaged directly with legislators to advocate for stronger communities and social justice.

This dedication to advocacy was also echoed on the national stage through Student Advocacy Day at the Capitol, hosted as part of Social Work Day on the Hill by the Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy (CRISP). Centered on the theme “*Our Voices Matter: Your Voice is Your Vote*,”

the convening emphasized the essential role social workers play in bridging community needs with legislative action and strengthening democratic engagement.

The GCSW sent eleven students to participate in the experience, which focused on preparing the next generation of social work leaders to actively engage in the policymaking process. Students attended targeted sessions and panels designed to strengthen practical advocacy skills, including storytelling, policy communication, and civic engagement strategies. A defining component of the experience was direct engagement with policymakers, where students applied their training in real time—discussing policy priorities, sharing community-informed perspectives, and advocating for meaningful change.



(Photo Caption: MSW Students in D.C.)

Together, SWAD and Student Advocacy Day at the Capitol illustrated that advocacy is both a responsibility and a skill—one rooted in voice, relationship-building, and action. As GCSW students continue to chart their paths toward excellence, they embody the promise of the profession and the power of social workers to shape policies that advance equity, justice, and community well-being at the local, state, and national levels.

Finding New Ways to Heal: How Snakes and Social Work Education Are Expanding Clinical Therapy

MSW STUDENT DUSTIN LARSEN REIMAGINES CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICE THROUGH THE ETHICAL USE OF SNAKES



At first glance, horses and snakes may seem worlds away from a traditional therapy room. But for GCSW MSW student Dustin Larsen, animals are not just companions or curiosities—they are collaborators in healing. Through his work in **animal-assisted therapy**, Dustin is helping the profession imagine what is possible when humans invite other species into therapeutic relationships.

Set to graduate this May, Dustin's path into social work began long before he ever set foot in a classroom. "I've always loved animals," he explains. "As a kid I was constantly bringing them home—roly-polies, lizards, hermit crabs, snakes." Snakes, in particular, fascinated him. Initially shaped by Discovery Channel warnings and cultural myths, his curiosity gradually turned into understanding. "They're important to the environment and not at all what people fear," he says. "I think a lot of young people relate to that feeling of being misunderstood."

As a child, Dustin begged his mother for a snake. She said no—a small heartbreak that eventually led to a compromise: a prairie dog. Years later, his passion turned professional when he began working at exotic animal expos featuring hedgehogs, sugar gliders, snakes, spiders, and more. It was there that he met a young girl who would change the course of his life.

SPRING 2026

She was around 12 or 13, essentially non-verbal, and attended the expo with her grandmother. "Her grandmother helped her pick out a hedgehog," Dustin recalls. "She didn't make eye contact with me or speak—just small nods." Three months later, when the expo returned to the same city, the girl walked directly up to him and said, "Would you like to see my hedgehog?" The transformation was undeniable.

"Over the next four years, I watched her grow into someone with interests, confidence, and eventually career aspirations," Dustin says. "She's now in cosmetology school." Through conversations with the girl's grandmother, Dustin had a powerful realization: as the girl learned to advocate for her hedgehog—what it needed and how to care for it—she also learned to advocate for herself. "That moment changed my life," he says. "I thought, if a hedgehog can spark that, why not snakes? And that's where this pursuit began."

Snake-assisted therapy is still emerging, but early observations, practice wisdom, and preliminary research suggest that snakes may offer a unique pathway to connection, especially for individuals who do not respond to more traditional animal-assisted approaches. Some research and case narratives indicate that people on the autism spectrum may approach snakes without the same expectations or social pressure often associated with dogs. For some, snakes spark curiosity and help regulate the nervous system in unexpected ways.

Dustin has seen the power of nontraditional animals repeatedly throughout his work. He has handled many exotic species, including spider monkeys, whose cognitive abilities are often compared to those of young children. "There have been days where I've gone in feeling really low," he says, "and their natural grooming and calming behaviors pulled me out of it. Anyone can bond with an animal—dog, cat, spider, snake, or horse—but snakes do something for me that I still don't fully understand. That's why I'm researching it."

When asked why he chose social work, Dustin says it feels like something he has been doing for years. Much of his early adulthood was spent offering emotional support long before he had the language of "practice," "ethics," or "clinical intervention." Coming to the Graduate College of Social Work gave him both a professional home and the institutional support to explore an unconventional idea. "GCSW allowed me to study what I'd already been doing," he says, "and to explore whether snake-based therapy could be possible. And the answer is yes."

That sense of possibility echoes the College's campaign question: What Can We Do With an Advanced Social Work Degree? For Dustin, the answer is shaped by mentors who believed in him. In the animal world, his childhood hero was Steve Irwin, whose enthusiasm sparked a lifelong sense of wonder. In social work, his hero stands beside him. "Clinical Professor Donna Amtberg, LCSW, took my interests seriously, believed in me, and brought me into her world," he says. "That changed my life."

Dustin's work is a reminder that clinical innovation does not always come from new technology or diagnostic tools. Sometimes, it begins with a hedgehog, a snake resting quietly in someone's hands, and social workers willing to ask a simple but transformative question: What else is possible?



(Photo Caption: Dustin Larsen with a student)

No Coog Left Hungry: GCSW Students Lead the Charge Against Food Insecurity



For many college students, hunger is an invisible barrier—one that quietly threatens academic success, mental health, and overall well-being. At the University of Houston, where an estimated one in three students experience food insecurity, Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) students are refusing to let their peers face that reality alone.

That commitment led to the creation of **No Coog Left Hungry**, a student-led initiative rooted in compassion, advocacy, and action. Founded by MSW students Alexandria Cardenas and Hallie Hasenbank, the initiative reflects what happens when social work values move beyond the classroom and into community care.

What began as a food drive quickly became something more—a coordinated effort to ensure students across campus know where help exists and feel empowered to use it. Through strategic outreach, donation campaigns, and partnerships with campus resources, No Coog Left Hungry supports the Cougar Cupboard, UH’s on-campus food pantry that provides enrolled students with up to 30 pounds of groceries each week. For students balancing tuition, housing, textbooks, and transportation, that access can be transformational.

But for Alexandria and Hallie, the work is deeply personal.

(Photo Caption: Alexandria Cardenas)

“I grew up in a lower-middle-class household and remember facing food insecurity as a kid,” Alexandria shares. “I wanted students to know they’re not alone—and that needing help doesn’t mean you don’t belong here.”

Hallie, whose interests center on macro social work, advocacy, and policy, echoes that sentiment. “Nobody should have to sacrifice basic needs like food in order to pursue an education,” she says. “When systems fall short, community has to step in.”

The founders’ complementary paths in social work strengthen the effort. Hallie, an interim leader within the International Social Work Association, brings a systems-level lens to the issue, while Alexandria—whose focus includes clinical social work, mental health, and international practice—grounds the initiative in empathy and student connection. Together, they exemplify how social workers lead across micro, mezzo, and macro spaces.

Through a three-pronged model—time, resources, and financial support—the initiative engaged the broader UH and Houston communities in sustaining access to food and essential supplies such as hygiene products, shelf-stable meals, and high-protein items. Volunteers help sort and distribute donations, while financial contributions expand the Cougar Cupboard’s purchasing power year-round.

(Photo Caption: Hallie Hasenbank)

Although No Coog Left Hungry began as a single campaign, its impact continues beyond seasonal timelines. The need for food access doesn’t end when classes do—and neither does the commitment of GCSW students to care for one another. In true social work fashion, No Coog Left Hungry is more than a response to a problem. It’s a reminder of what’s possible when students lead with lived experience, professional values, and the belief that no one should have to choose between nourishment and education.



Evidence of EXCELLENCE



At the Intersection of Law, Policy, and Social Work

HOW MSW STUDENT, FRIDA QUIROZ FOUND HER PERFECT FIT IN IMPACT LITIGATION AND STATEWIDE ADVOCACY

Frida Quiroz has always understood the power of having a voice—and using it. Long before she began pursuing her MSW at the GCSW she was the student who thrived in debate rounds, spending all four years of high school sharpening her arguments and even advancing to the state competition. What she didn't fully realize at the time was that she was already shaping the foundation of her future career: advocacy, truth-telling, and speaking up for communities she deeply cares about.

Her path toward social work began with the social workers who supported her throughout her adolescence. Their impact stayed with her, creating a sense of recognition—this is who I want to be for others. After earning her Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Houston–Clear Lake, Frida continued her journey at the GCSW, a place she saw as aligned with her values, identities, and lived experiences. The Indigenous, LGBTQIA+, queer, and immigrant communities she belongs to are not just part of her story; they are central to her purpose. Social work, to her, felt like the most authentic way to amplify the strengths she already carried as a young person with a voice that did not waver.

This clarity became even more pronounced when she began her practicum at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Texas, a placement far outside the traditional image of social work but perfectly aligned with her passion for

systems-level change. The ACLU of Texas, often in the headlines for its impact litigation and public advocacy, engages with policy at the macro level by challenging laws that affect marginalized Texans. It's not the first place most people picture when thinking of social work, and that's exactly what makes it so meaningful to Frida.

Her days as a policy and advocacy intern are fast-paced and dynamic. She begins by sorting through a steady stream of updates across internal messaging channels, following developments in cases related to harmful state policies. She tracks legislation—most recently SB11, which concerns daily periods of prayer or religious readings in public schools—by monitoring school district decisions across Texas and organizing the information in constantly evolving spreadsheets. She collaborates with agencies across the state, contributing to coalition-building efforts and ensuring partners are aligned in their strategies. She also produces accessible materials and other educational tools designed to help Texans understand how policy affects their everyday lives.

What anchors her work is the social work lens she brings to an organization not widely viewed as a “social work” space. She centers community voices, treats constituents as experts in their own experiences, and recognizes that education is a form of empowerment. Programs like the ACLU's Free Speech Academy—which teaches individuals how to engage with city councils, school boards, and other local bodies—exemplify the kind of civic engagement she sees as essential to macro practice. Through this practicum, Frida has seen firsthand that social work does not have to be limited to clinical practice. Change can happen from the top down as much as from the bottom up.

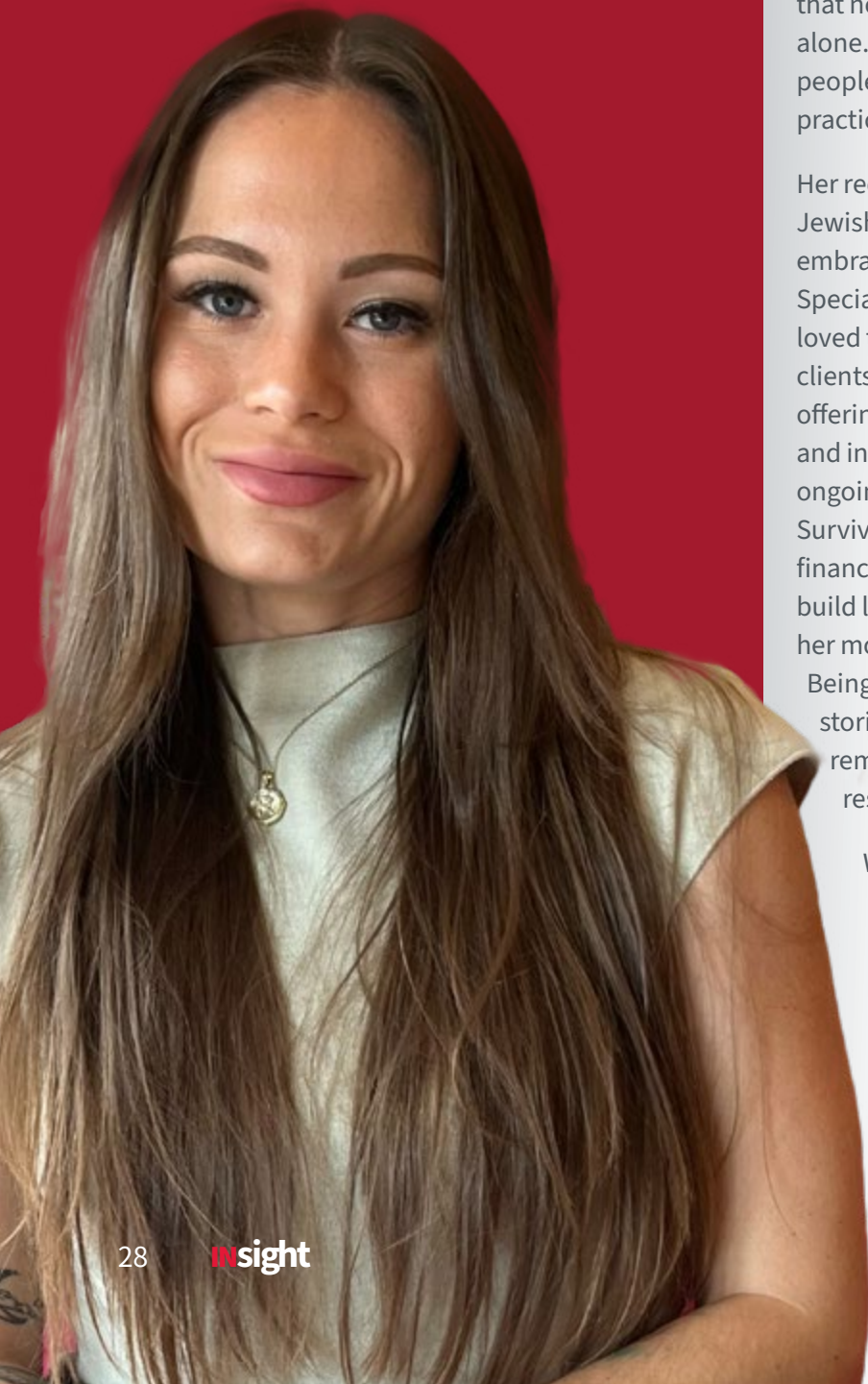
Her cohort at the GCSW reflects the spirit of transformation she sees in herself. If she had to describe her graduating class in three words, they would be eager, fearless, and unapologetic. They are eager to enter a world shaped by rapid political and social change. Fearless in challenging outdated notions of what social work can be. Unapologetic about who they are, what they believe, and the power they hold—especially in political and advocacy spaces. Frida sees them as freethinkers who create space for honest dialogue and diverse perspectives as they prepare to advocate at the Capitol, at rallies, and in communities across Texas.

“
I hope to challenge the misconception that new social workers must begin in clinical roles before moving into policy or advocacy. Instead, I plan to apply the skills obtained in practicum to step directly into legislative and systems-focused work.
”

As Frida prepares to graduate, she imagines her future and envisions herself continuing in spaces where her voice and her advocacy matter—like the ACLU of Texas, where macro social work is not an afterthought but the core of the work. She hopes to challenge the misconception that new social workers must begin in clinical roles before moving into policy or advocacy. Instead, she plans to apply the skills obtained from her practicum to step directly into legislative and systems-focused work. With her passion, lived experience, and commitment to justice, she is poised to become the kind of social worker who not only amplifies community voices but also helps reshape the systems that affect them.

A Journey Rooted in Resilience

A WORKING MOM'S STORY OF PERSEVERANCE, PRACTICUM IMPACT, AND PURPOSE AT THE GCSW



Born and raised in Houston, MSW Student Rebecca Jones has always believed in the power of compassion.

After earning her undergraduate degree in social work from the University of Houston–Downtown, she chose to pursue the field further because of her own lived experiences. Having navigated seasons of darkness and isolation, she knew firsthand how transformative it is to feel seen, heard, and supported. Social work became her way of ensuring that no one should face their hardest moments alone. It offered her the opportunity to stand with people through vulnerable times and provide both practical support and authentic human connection.

Her recent practicum experience at Alexander Jewish Family Service (AJFS) allowed her to fully embrace that purpose. As a Case Management Specialist, her days were never identical—and she loved that. She spent her time connecting with clients, assessing needs, coordinating services, and offering guidance as they worked toward stability and independence. Her role included providing ongoing case management, supporting Holocaust Survivors with specialized services, and offering financial coaching to help individuals and families build long-term confidence. What stayed with her most was the resilience she witnessed daily. Being trusted with someone's story—especially stories shaped by generational trauma and remarkable strength—reinforced the honor and responsibility of this work.

While her practicum was fulfilling, her personal journey through graduate school was equally profound. Balancing parenthood, a full-time career, and the rigor of the MSW program became one of the most challenging periods of her life. Yet, it was her “why” that carried

SPRING 2026

her through the desire to grow, to better serve her clients, and to show her child what perseverance truly looks like. There were late nights, early mornings, and moments filled with doubt, but Rebecca kept showing up. That commitment strengthened her confidence and deepened her understanding of resilience—not just for her clients, but within herself.

Her experience at the GCSW played a significant role in this growth. The program challenged her to expand her knowledge, reflect on her lived experiences, and develop the discipline and grace needed to navigate demanding seasons. She carries forward a deep sense of gratitude for the community and the opportunities that shaped her journey.

For working parents considering the MSW path, she offers this encouragement: the journey is not easy, but it is possible. Give yourself grace. Lean on the people who want to support you. And remember—your lived experience is a strength. You bring something valuable into every classroom and every client interaction.

As she prepares to graduate in May, she is excited for what lies ahead. She plans to deepen her clinical skills, continue her work in community-based practice, and sit for the LMSW Licensure Exam, an important milestone in expanding her scope of practice. She looks forward to continuing her work with vulnerable populations, especially Holocaust Survivors and individuals working toward financial stability, using advanced knowledge and evidence-based approaches to elevate the support she provides.

Her journey is one of resilience, purpose, and dedication—reflecting the heart of social work and the transformative experience she cultivated during her time at the GCSW.



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The journey is not easy, but it is possible. Give yourself grace. Lean on the people who want to support you. And remember—your lived experience is a strength. You bring something valuable into every classroom and every client interaction.
”

Redefining Where Social Work Belongs

LETICIA MARISOL BARRIOS AND THE POWER OF CORPORATE SOCIAL WORK



Leticia Marisol Barrios is clear about one thing: social work does not belong to one sector, one job title, or one narrowly defined role. It belongs wherever systems shape people's lives—including corporate, legal, and policy-driven spaces that have not traditionally been seen as homes for social workers. For Leticia, that belief is more than a philosophy—it is the throughline of her education, her practicum, and her vision for the future of the profession.

An advanced-standing, nontraditional student at the Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW), Leticia has been intentional about preparing herself for work beyond traditional nonprofit or clinical settings. She is drawn to corporate and macro-level environments not because they are easier—but because they are powerful. “Social workers don't need to be martyrs to create change,” she says. “We need to be in the rooms where decisions and resources are distributed.”

That perspective has shaped how Leticia shows up across her academic journey. Born in Guatemala and raised in Houston, her path to social work was not linear, but it was purposeful. Long before she had language for systems change or macro practice, she felt a steady pull toward advocacy, strategy, and impact. “I've lived many lives,” she reflects, “but the desire to make change was always there.”

At the GCSW, Leticia has leaned fully into that calling—especially through her practicum at BakerRipley Citizenship and Immigration Services. Working in a legal setting alongside attorneys and Department of Justice-accredited representatives, she brings a trauma informed, person in environment lens to immigration advocacy.

While the work is rooted in law, Leticia sees social work as essential to restoring humanity in a space that can easily become procedural.

“People aren't just paperwork,” she says. “They are sharing some of the most vulnerable parts of their lives.” Through her practicum, she has helped train legal professionals in trauma informed interviewing and supported both clients and staff navigating the emotional toll of the work. Her presence reinforces something she believes deeply: social workers don't replace other professionals—they expand what is possible.

“*Social workers don't replace other professionals—they expand what is possible.*”

Her time at GCSW has repeatedly affirmed the value of that lens. Even as a macro student, Leticia has drawn on her training to support clients experiencing acute anxiety, calmly holding space when others felt overwhelmed. She has also exercised her advocacy skills by launching a resource focused initiative that connects individuals directly to trusted immigration legal services—reducing barriers, confusion, and fear.

Just as formative as the work itself has been the community she has found within her cohort. Leticia speaks openly about the importance of peer connection, especially as an advanced standing student moving through the program at an accelerated pace. Her cohort—affectionately known as the “Macro Mommies,”—has been a source of support, humor, and shared understanding. That sense of connection deepened during a university sponsored trip to Washington, D.C., where she saw policy in action and met social workers working beyond direct practice. “It made everything we learn feel real,” she says.

Looking ahead, Leticia is unapologetic about her goals. She is drawn to corporate and international social work—spaces that are still considered unconventional within the profession. Her interest is rooted in both values and sustainability. “Social workers don't need to be martyrs to create change,” she says. She believes corporate social work offers an opportunity to influence workplace well being, corporate responsibility, and funding decisions—areas that affect millions of lives. Being on the side of distributing resources rather than asking for them, she argues, is both powerful and long overdue.

That belief informs the advice she offers future social workers: know your worth, expand your idea of what's possible, and don't be afraid to claim space in places you don't traditionally see yourself. “The social work doesn't live in your job title,” she says. “It lives in you.”

When she reflects on the people who have shaped her journey, Leticia names both individuals and communities. Friends Obi and Jen, who introduced her to social work as a profession and helped her imagine a future she hadn't yet seen for herself. But her greatest inspiration comes from the communities she has worked alongside—particularly Indigenous artisans in Mexico and Guatemala during her earlier work. “People don't need to be saved,” she says. “They are resilient, capable, and powerful. With resources, people uplift themselves.”

From Access to Innovation

SAMANTHA PUEBLOS SHARES HER PASSION FOR ADVANCING ACCESS AND EQUITY THROUGH PEOPLE CENTERED TECHNOLOGY



For Sam, technology has never been abstract or optional—it has always been personal.

Born in the Philippines in 2003, Sam moved to the United States as a young child, first to Chicago and later to Texas, where she was raised and completed her K–12 education in Katy. As a blind student navigating multiple educational systems, Sam developed an early awareness of how environments, tools, and support systems impact opportunity and inclusion.

She carried that perspective with her to the University of Houston-Downtown, where she completed her Bachelor of Social Work. When selecting a graduate program, Sam chose the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work based on strong recommendations from alumni and her preference for in-person learning. For her, the GCSW offered a space where she could continue learning in community while building on the values and experiences that shaped her path into the profession.

Sam’s interest in social work is closely tied to her experience with assistive technology. Growing up, she relied on a range of tools to access her education, including CCTV magnifiers, customized iPad settings, and physical supports such as handheld magnifiers and slant boards. These tools made it possible for her to fully participate in the classroom, but they also revealed important gaps in access. “I was very lucky to have access to those resources,” she reflects, noting that many individuals who could benefit from similar tools are unable to obtain them due to cost or limited availability.

This awareness has become central to how Sam approaches both social work and technology. She challenges the idea that the two fields should

be separate, emphasizing that technology already shapes many of the systems social workers engage with. “In today’s world, technology is present in almost every area,” she explains, pointing to its influence on transportation, data, and access to services. For Sam, integrating technology into social work is not optional—it is necessary for reaching communities more effectively and improving how services are delivered.

At the same time, she is clear that technology must be approached with intention. Grounded in a social justice perspective, she believes social workers have a responsibility to help guide how these tools are developed and used. “I would like to see more people bring that same lens to technology... toward relationship-building, equity, and access,” she says.

In her current practicum with the Harris County Office of County Administration, she is developing a digital version of a civic engagement curriculum. Originally delivered through in-person workshops, the curriculum is being adapted into an animated YouTube series to reach individuals who may not be able to attend in person. This project reflects her ability to translate complex information into formats that are accessible, practical, and inclusive.

Sam identifies this ability—making complex ideas easier to understand—as one of her strengths. She is particularly interested in applying this skill to conversations around emerging technologies, which can often feel overwhelming or inaccessible. By breaking down these concepts, she hopes to help more people engage with technology in meaningful and informed ways.

Looking ahead, Sam sees social workers playing an increasingly important role in shaping ethical, human-centered technology. As digital tools become more integrated into daily life, she expects the profession to expand into areas such as policy, ethics, and system design.

She is actively exploring her own place within this evolving space by seeking interdisciplinary opportunities and continuing to build her technical knowledge. While she is interested in areas like cybersecurity, her long-term goal remains rooted in social work, with a particular interest in teaching and knowledge-sharing.

“

I don’t believe social workers need to become technology experts to shape the future—only that more of them feel empowered to learn together, share knowledge, and approach technology with curiosity rather than fear.

”

For future social workers, Sam emphasizes the importance of developing a foundational understanding of technology, especially tools like artificial intelligence. She acknowledges both the benefits and risks, noting that while these tools can improve efficiency, they also raise important ethical and safety concerns. “I don’t believe social workers need to become technology experts to shape the future—only that more of them feel empowered to learn together, share knowledge, and approach technology with curiosity rather than fear,” she says.

Her advice is grounded and collaborative: stay curious, learn alongside others, and approach technology as a shared responsibility rather than an individual burden. She believes that by working together, social workers can make these tools more accessible and better aligned with the needs of the communities they serve.

As Sam continues her journey, she remains focused on ensuring that as systems evolve, they do so in ways that expand access, promote equity, and center the people they are meant to serve.

Designing the Backbone of Care

DOMINI BRYANT'S MACRO SOCIAL WORK JOURNEY AT THE GCSW



For Domini Bryant, her time at the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work was not about discovering a calling—it was about sharpening one she has carried for years. After nearly three decades working in youth development, community education, and systems-level service, Domini entered the MSW program with a deep well of experience and a clear sense of purpose. GCSW became a space of reflection and construction, where theory, lived experience, and institutional imagination converged.

One of the most defining experiences of Domini's time at GCSW was the opportunity to design her own advanced macro practicum. Rather than stepping into an existing placement, she proposed a practicum centered on building the Inspired Learning Institute (ILI), a nonprofit education ecosystem she has been cultivating for years. With the support of her practicum instructor and faculty liaison, the practicum became a living laboratory—allowing Domini to apply macro social work principles in real time through nonprofit formation, governance development, program design, evaluation systems, and youth-centered leadership pathways.

Through ILI, Domini focused on reconnecting young people ages 13–24 who feel alienated from traditional educational, workforce, and civic spaces. By prioritizing mentorship, apprenticeship, spiritual literacy, community service, and economic participation, her work reflects a belief that macro social work is not abstract—it is structural care made visible. For Domini, Macro social work represents the leadership infrastructure of the profession. It is where innovators, builders, advocates, and courageous truth-tellers operate. Macro social workers serve as executives, directors, policy architects, lobbyists, strategists, and public voices who shape the systems that affect millions of lives.

Without macro social work, the profession loses its structural backbone. Direct

practice is essential, but macro practice provides the policy, institutional design, and systemic strategy that allow care to reach entire communities. When the macro foundation is strong, the whole profession stands stronger.

Looking ahead, Domini plans to continue building the Inspired Learning Institute while pursuing doctoral studies at the GCSW. Her proposed research explores how covenant-based models of leadership and institutional design can reimagine connection, belonging, and moral responsibility for marginalized and disconnected youth. She also hopes to serve as an adjunct instructor in macro social work education, helping train future social workers to design programs, launch organizations, influence policy, and steward resources responsibly.

“
Without macro social work, the profession loses its structural backbone. Direct practice is essential, but macro practice provides the policy, institutional design, and systemic strategy that allow care to reach entire communities. When the macro foundation is strong, the whole profession stands stronger.
”

To future MSW students, Domini offers clear and courageous advice: do not shrink your vision to fit a practicum site. Instead, build a practicum that fits the vision you carry for the world. She encourages students to bring their full stories into the classroom, ask bigger questions, and design solutions—not just interventions. Her experience at GCSW affirmed that social work belongs everywhere decisions about equity, justice, and wellbeing are made—and that macro social work is essential to ensuring the profession stands strong.

Her message to the next generation of social workers is simple and powerful: think bigger, build boldly, and take your seat at the table.

2025

Ima Hogg
Foundation for
Mental Health
Scholarship
Award



Essie T. Richardson
MSW Student

Honors and Doctoral Achievements

A special congratulatory tribute to those earning their Ph.D.'s from the GCSW this Spring. Your dedication, hard work, and scholarly achievements have not only earned you a well-deserved doctoral degree but have also contributed significantly to the academic excellence of the GCSW.



**ANIL
ARORA**



**MARCUS
BROWN**



**HELEN
CLANCY**



**YING
MA**



**AYESHA
TARIQ**

Dear PhD Graduates,

What a remarkable journey you have undertaken. We encourage you all to stop and recognize not only *what* you have accomplished, but *who* you have become in this process.

Your unique journeys began with curiosity, ambition, and the courage to ask questions that had no easy answers, and today, you leave as scholars who have not only found those answers but have reshaped the very questions worth asking. You have spent countless late nights wrestling with data, theory, and doubt. You have revised and reconsidered, defended, and persevered. Through every setback—the chapters rewritten, the moments when the finish line felt impossibly far—you chose to press forward. That perseverance is not a footnote to your achievement; it *is* your achievement!

The research you have produced, the ideas you have advanced, cross-disciplinary collaborations you've made, and the problems you have tackled will echo in classrooms, clinics, and communities for years to come. You've also contributed something quieter but equally profound—mentorship, community, and collegiality—showing up for one another through the pressures and peculiarities of doctoral life in ways that made this institution richer and more human-centered.

As you step into this next chapter, as professors, researchers, practitioners, policymakers, innovators, and leaders, carry with you the knowledge that you have already done something extraordinary. You have earned the title of Dr. that precedes your name, but more than that, you

have earned the wisdom, resilience, and intellectual depth that no diploma can fully capture. The world you are entering needs minds like yours: rigorous yet imaginative, disciplined yet bold.

Remember this: your voice matters. Your growth does not end here—and most importantly, take pride in this moment of celebration. It has been our privilege, as Associate Dean and Advising Director of the GCSW PhD Program, to walk alongside you on this journey, and we are cheering for everything you are about to become.

With tremendous pride and warmest congratulations,



Quenette L. Walton, PhD, LCSW, Associate Professor
Associate Dean for Doctoral Education, Humana
Endowed Chair in Social Determinants of Health



De'Idra Richard, MBA
Doctoral Program Director of Student Advising
and Support Service



Alumni Illumination

At the Graduate College of Social Work, we know an advanced degree in social work is more than a credential—it's a catalyst for impact. Alumni Illumination celebrates GCSW alumni whose careers reflect the question at the heart of our #WCYD | What Can You Do? campaign.

*From advancing policy and leading organizations to providing care, conducting research, and building community-driven solutions, these alumni embody the values instilled through their education and demonstrate the far-reaching influence of **social work in action**.*

Building Bridges to Healing and Empowerment

GCSW ALUMNA SHAJUAN ALEXANDER TRANSFORMS MENTAL HEALTH CARE THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION.

In the heart of Houston's social work community, Shajuan Alexander, LCSW-S, stands as a powerful example of what's possible when purpose meets preparation. A proud 2017 graduate of the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW), Shajuan is the founder of **Culture of Health PLLC**, a private practice dedicated to transformative mental health and career services for high-achieving women of color. Her work reflects the values of healing, empowerment, and equity—principles that echo the GCSW's mission.

After transferring from the University of Missouri-Kansas City with a year of MSW coursework, Shajuan completed her degree at the GCSW in just one academic year. "The clinical track at the GCSW aligned with my goals in a way my previous program didn't," she shares. "It gave me the space to specialize and grow." That decision set the stage for a career defined by intention and innovation.

Today, Shajuan leads a thriving practice that offers psychotherapy, clinical supervision, and immigration evaluations. She's also preparing to launch a consulting agency in 2026 to support healthcare organizations through a clinical lens. Her journey demonstrates what's possible when social work education is paired with vision and resilience.

Relocating to Houston with her family, Shajuan sought out the best in social work education—and found it at the GCSW. "Everyone I spoke to recommended UH," she recalls. Receiving Dr. McClain Sampson's **Global Leaders of Behavioral Health Education (GLOBE)** grant sealed the deal. "The relationships and reputation made the choice very simple." That sense of belonging continues today, as she remains an engaged alumna

committed to giving back.

Shajuan credits the GCSW's therapist-professors and mentorship culture for shaping her clinical foundation. "The practice sessions, research, and relationships gave me the confidence I needed," she says. That foundation now supports her work in private practice and consulting. She continues to contribute to the profession through CEUs, guest lectures, and mentorship.

Her message to students is clear: "Social work will always be relevant because it centers on human needs." She encourages resilience, full licensure, and staying true to one's mission. "One graduate degree and two licenses have allowed me to build a multifaceted career. What you have is already enough."

Rather than naming public figures, Shajuan honors those who walked beside her: Dr. Sampson, who saw her potential as a young mother and student; Sheila Joseph, her clinical supervisor, who kept her focused on becoming a therapist; and K'Breaun Sharpe, a fellow UH graduate and peer, with whom she shares a sisterhood in social work and entrepreneurship.

For Shajuan, mentorship is more than a professional tool—it's a personal calling and a direct extension of her commitment to her alma mater, the GCSW. She mentors two students each year, offering guidance rooted in affirmation, empowerment, and presence. Through mentorship, Shajuan reminds us that charting our paths to excellence is not just a destination—it's a shared journey.



From Classroom Curiosity to Community Healing

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES THROUGH RESEARCH AND WELLNESS

When Dr. Maurya Glaude walked through the doors of the GCSW, she carried a vision: to heal families and advocate for communities often left out of research conversations. That vision has since grown into a career that seamlessly blends scholarship, mentorship, and clinical practice rooted in social justice.

Her journey began in an abnormal psychology class at Texas Southern University, where she discovered social work's unique ability to unite advocacy and action. After earning her MSW at Tulane University, Dr. Glaude realized her calling extended beyond practice—she yearned to teach, mentor, and influence policy. “Family dynamics called me to social work,” she recalls, “and I knew the GCSW was where I needed to be to learn culturally relevant research and leadership skills.”

Since completing her Ph.D. in 2017, Dr. Glaude has become a published researcher, **author**, and educator. In her desire to give back to the communities that welcomed her, she now guides master's and doctoral students while serving in leadership and mentorship roles. Her work niche prioritizes adolescents and the professionals who support them, with a focus on preventive care and wellness. She credits the GCSW for preparing her for leadership with an open door and a deep commitment to community.

That commitment shapes her advice to future social workers: “Be clear about your calling. The students who thrive are those committed to social justice, whether in clinical, mezzo, or macro practice.” She emphasizes that pursuing an advanced social work

degree is an investment in both self and community. An investment requiring resilience and flexibility.

Recognizing the exhaustion many advocates feel today, Dr. Glaude founded Stillness Circles—community-based spaces that prioritize wellness over constant resilience. “Community is what drew me to this work, and it's where I restore and heal,” she says. Through her LLC, she curates wellness experiences for women of color, bridging research and practice to ensure healing reaches those who need it most.

Dr. Glaude's story reminds us that social work is more than a profession—it's a movement. It's about mentoring, advocating, and innovating. It's about amplifying marginalized voices in research and creating spaces for healing and joy. As she puts it, “Pursuing a social work degree at the GCSW is an investment in transformation.”



The Pivot That Led to Purpose

GRADUATE COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK (GCSW) ALUMNA ELIZABETH WESTBROOK BUILDS BRIDGES BETWEEN THERAPY AND THEOLOGY

Elizabeth Westbrook's path to social work began with a pivot—and a purpose. Originally a business major in her home state of Kansas, she realized her calling was rooted in advocacy, healing, and community. That realization led her to the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, where she earned her MSW in 2023 and began shaping a career defined by integrity and impact.

Today, Elizabeth is a licensed therapist and the founder and Board President of **The Mental Wellness Collective** a nonprofit dedicated to advancing conversations around sexual and mental wellness in churches and community spaces. She also collaborates with **The Reclaimed Collective**, extending her reach into faith-based environments where such topics are often overlooked.

Her Instagram handle, **@sneakerheadtherapist**, reflects her commitment to authenticity. “We can both like sneakers and mental health,” she jokes, emphasizing that showing up fully, with personality and purpose, is part of the work.

Elizabeth chose social work because it offered a framework for sustainable change without the pressure to “save everyone.” She speaks candidly about rejecting the savior complex often embedded in helping professions. “You cannot care about everything to the same degree, everyone suffers,” she says. “For me, it's been freeing to say: I don't have to do it all. I just need to operate with integrity.”

At the GCSW, Elizabeth found the space to evolve. “I'm not who I was when I graduated,” she laughs. “Allowing yourself to grow—your understanding of social work, your goals...that's part of the journey.”

Elizabeth's work is deeply informed by her GCSW experience. She sees her education not just as preparation, but as a foundation for navigating real-world complexities. “I work in the office and see clients three days a week,” she shares, balancing professional responsibilities with parenting. “At 38, I'm a much different parent than I was at 24.”

Her practice is rooted in community, faith, and healing. All of these spaces are where social work principles are essential. Whether leading a workshop or hosting a happy hour for mental wellness, Elizabeth brings her full self to the table.

When asked what advice she'd offer to those considering or currently pursuing an advanced degree in social work, Elizabeth offers this: “Know yourself and allow yourself to change over time. You don't have to be everything to everyone. Just be someone who shows up with integrity.”





Sylvia Brooks Selected to Receive the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work Honorary Alumna Award

For Sylvia Brooks, being named an Honorary Alumna of the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) is both meaningful and deeply personal. Her longstanding connection to the University, its students, and the broader Houston community has been rooted in service, leadership, and a steadfast commitment to expanding opportunity.

A nationally respected civic leader, Sylvia has remained closely engaged with the GCSW over the years—not simply as a partner, but as an advocate for student growth and real-world preparation. As a former member of the Dean’s Advisory Council, adjunct faculty member, practicum instructor, and community collaborator, she has helped shape pathways for students to move from classroom learning into meaningful practice. Her work facilitating more than 150 internships through the Third Ward Community Cloth (3rd Ward Cloth) and its partners stands as a testament to her belief that education must extend beyond the classroom and into the communities social workers ultimately serve. Of these, 35 internships were summer placements for undergraduate social work students from Prairie View A&M University, Texas Southern University, and Springfield College, many of whom contributed to Third Ward Community Cloth service projects.

Sylvia’s distinguished career reflects a lifelong commitment to service and leadership. She began as a child welfare caseworker in Texas and went on to serve as a professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, a recruiter of minority women at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and a leader within United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast. Her academic foundation—a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Texas Southern University and a Master of Social Work from the University of Southern California—grounded a career defined by impact.

As the first female President and CEO of the Houston Area Urban League (HAUL) (1990–2007), Sylvia built a legacy centered on access, equity, and empowerment. Under her leadership, the organization expanded critical programs in education, workforce development, and community advancement. Initiatives such as the “Watch Me Read” literacy program supported early childhood development, while partnerships with organizations like IBM introduced workforce training and technology access. Large-scale job fairs connected thousands to employment opportunities, and the Housing Counseling Program helped individuals and families move toward homeownership—one of her signature achievements.

Her leadership has always extended beyond organizational success to broader community transformation. Sylvia was a founding member of the Third Ward Community Cloth Cooperative, an innovative “organization of organizations” designed to improve outcomes for children and families while strengthening connections between the University and the community it serves.

Mentorship and access have been defining forces in Sylvia’s own journey, and she has carried those values forward in every stage of her career.

She understands that success is rarely achieved alone and has made it a priority to create opportunities for others—opening doors, offering guidance, and investing in the next generation of leaders.

As she prepares to address graduates at commencement, Sylvia’s message centers on resilience, purpose, and impact. She encourages students to “decide what you can do, maintain your focus, and do your best,” while remaining grounded in their values and open to growth and change. She reminds them that effective social work requires both courage and compassion.

What gives Sylvia hope is the next generation itself. She sees in emerging social workers and community leaders a passion for justice, a willingness to challenge systems, and a commitment to creating meaningful change. Their energy and perspective, she believes, will continue to move the profession—and communities—forward.

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As someone who has spent decades observing and working in area of social change in the Houston area, I can honestly state that no one is more deserving than Sylvia Brooks of receiving this award for a lifetime of being an exemplary leader for social change. She has led organizations of change, founded change organizations, established programs that changed lives and taught, supervised and mentored students hoping to be change agents. In so doing she has been responsible for ripples of transformative change for individuals, families and the larger community that will reverberate forever. She is the best; the ideal role model for those wanting to impact the world in a meaningful way as she has done.

*– Elwyn Lee, J.D., Vice President
for Neighborhood & Strategic Initiatives*

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Evidence *of*
EXCELLENCE

2026 GRADUATION CELEBRATION



CELEBRATION

Thursday, May 14th
4:00 PM
1st Floor GCSW

COMMENCEMENT

Friday, May 15th
7:00 PM
Fertitta Center 3422 Cullen Blvd, Houston, TX 77204



Graduate College of Social Work
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON