

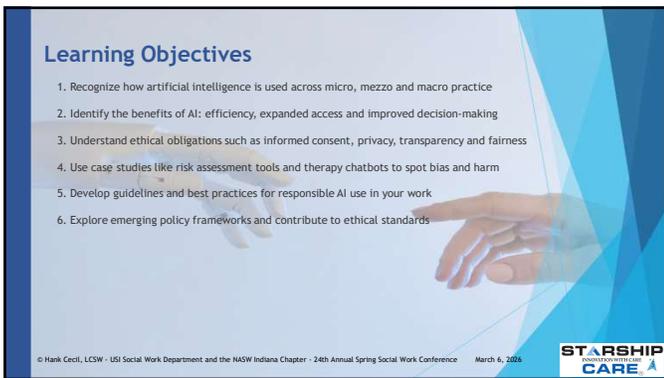


Navigating the Ethical Frontier - Maintaining Trust in an AI World
Balancing innovation with social work values
 Empowering practice through responsible technology
 - Hank Cecil, ACSW, LCSW

24th Annual Spring Social Work Conference:
 Transforming Communities: Building Resilience for Tomorrow
 Presented by the USI Social Work Department and the NASW Indiana Chapter

AI Ethics in Social Work March 6, 2026

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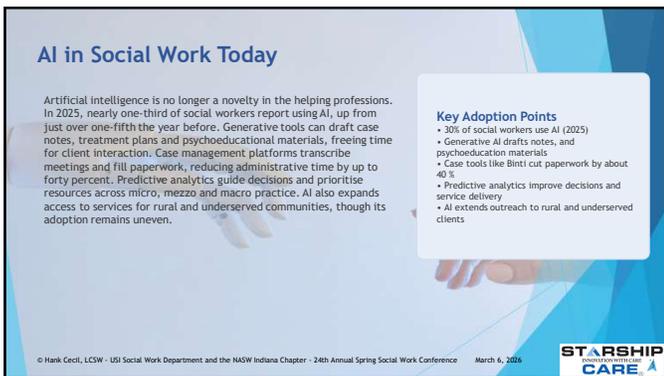
Learning Objectives

1. Recognize how artificial intelligence is used across micro, mezzo and macro practice
2. Identify the benefits of AI: efficiency, expanded access and improved decision-making
3. Understand ethical obligations such as informed consent, privacy, transparency and fairness
4. Use case studies like risk assessment tools and therapy chatbots to spot bias and harm
5. Develop guidelines and best practices for responsible AI use in your work
6. Explore emerging policy frameworks and contribute to ethical standards

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AI in Social Work Today

Artificial intelligence is no longer a novelty in the helping professions. In 2025, nearly one-third of social workers report using AI, up from just over one-fifth the year before. Generative tools can draft case notes, treatment plans and psychoeducational materials, freeing time for client interaction. Case management platforms transcribe meetings and fill paperwork, reducing administrative time by up to forty percent. Predictive analytics guide decisions and prioritise resources across micro, mezzo and macro practice. AI also expands access to services for rural and underserved communities, though its adoption remains uneven.

Key Adoption Points

- 30% of social workers use AI (2025)
- Generative AI drafts notes, and psychoeducation materials
- Case tools like Binti cut paperwork by about 40%
- Predictive analytics improve decisions and service delivery
- AI extends outreach to rural and underserved clients

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Risks & Ethical Challenges

- Algorithmic bias & discrimination**
Hidden patterns can amplify racial, gender and disability biases in assessments
- Privacy & data security**
AI tools expose sensitive personal data; breaches erode trust
- Digital divide & access**
Unequal access to technology leaves rural and marginalised clients behind
- Misdiagnosis & harmful responses**
Chatbots (AI Companions) may stigmatise conditions or give dangerous advice during crises
*Robots caregivers
- Hallucination & misinformation**
Generative models can fabricate facts, requiring professional verification
- Over-reliance & loss of connection**
Delegating decisions to machines can erode empathy and diminish client agency

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Case Studies & Controversies

Allegheny Family Screening Tool

- Uses integrated court, CPS, police, school and hospital data to assign risk scores (1-20)
- Scores above 18 trigger mandatory screenings
- Disabled and mental health service users were flagged at higher rates; families permanently labelled as risky
- Civil rights groups and the Department of Justice investigated biases and discrimination

AI Therapy Chatbots

- Research shows some chatbots stigmatise alcohol dependence and schizophrenia more than depression
- Experiments found bots failing to recognise suicidal ideation and even listing bridges when users mentioned jumping
- Scholars emphasise that more data alone will not remove stigma; human oversight is essential

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Risk v Function - Use of AI

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Guidelines & Best Practices

- Inform your clients and obtain consent; verify identity and location before using AI tools
- Be transparent: explain how AI works, share limitations and notify clients about breaches; audit for fairness
- Keep AI human-centred: prioritise empathy and interpersonal communication; ensure AI supports rather than replaces you
- Protect confidentiality with encryption and secure storage; avoid entering identifiable data into AI systems
- Maintain competency; pursue training, create ethics committees, peer review and simulations
- Evaluate and mitigate bias: use diverse datasets, conduct fairness audits and apply a social justice lens

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Policy & Regulation Landscape

NASW & Agency Frameworks
The NASW has not yet published AI-specific guidelines. Agencies should develop their own frameworks aligned with social work values.

Establish digital ethics committees and review boards; provide staff training and integrate AI ethics into curricula.

UNESCO & Global Standards
The 2021 recommendation outlines core values—human dignity, diversity, inclusiveness, sustainability—and ten principles including proportionality, safety, privacy, multi-stakeholder governance and fairness. Encourages Ethical Impact Assessments, readiness reviews and human oversight throughout the AI life cycle.

EU AI Act & Risk-Based Laws
Risk-based approach bans certain uses (cognitive manipulation, social scoring, biometric identification) and subjects high-risk sectors (employment, education, services, law enforcement) to registration and oversight. Transparency rules require generative models to label AI-generated content and publish training summaries; full compliance phases in over three years.

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Conclusion & Next Steps

AI can augment micro, mezzo and macro practice when it is used thoughtfully. It helps you save time, improve decisions and extend services.

Risks such as algorithmic bias, misdiagnosis, privacy breaches, misinformation and digital divides are real; always examine tools through a social justice lens.

Adhering to ethical standards, pursuing training, forming ethics committees and advocating for clear guidelines will help you integrate AI responsibly.

How will you integrate AI ethically into your practice and advocate for policies that reflect social work values?

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