



# MSW 535: From the Client to the System: Ecological Approaches to Homelessness

## Instructor Information

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## Course Information

MSW 535, Section 1

Fall 2026

Day/Time: Tuesday 5-6:30pm


Location: Ida B. Wells Building, Room 17


Credits: 3

Pre-requisites: MSW 501 & MSW 503


## Course Description

*From the Client to the System: Ecological Approaches to Homelessness* is an advanced elective for MSW students ready to move beyond foundational practice skills learned in 501 and 503 toward a more integrated understanding of homelessness as both a clinical and structural challenge. The course examines homelessness by holding client experience and systemic reality in the same frame. The course focuses on best practices with people experiencing homelessness and on systems-level change, including policy analysis, advocacy strategy, and leveraging collaborative partnerships. An equity and antiracist framework runs throughout, informing both how students understand root causes and how they engage in intervention at every level. Horizontally, the course holds a key place in the continuum of care skill development.

Student Learning Objectives	CSWE Competencies 
Apply antiracist frameworks across direct practice and systemic contexts. Critically examine how racism, historical disinvestment, and systemic oppression produce and sustain homelessness disproportionately among Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color.	#2: Advance Human Rights and Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice  #3: Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) in Practice
Demonstrate trauma-informed, strengths-based practice with individuals and families experiencing homelessness, applying evidence-based approaches, such as Critical Time Intervention and harm reduction, that center dignity, empowerment, and self-determination.	#6: Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities  #8: Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
Critically analyze policies and procedures shaping homelessness services, with particular attention to processes that undermine client stability in favor of institutional or systemic priorities. Develop advocacy strategies to challenge and reform those processes at the practice, program, and policy level.	#2: Advance Human Rights and Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice  #5: Engage in Policy Practice
Integrate research evidence into practice and policy decisions related to homelessness.	#4: Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice

<b>Required Course Textbooks/Readings:</b> 	<b>Supplemental Textbooks/Readings:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adler, K. F., Burnes, D. W., Banh, A., &amp; Bilbija, A. (2023). When we walk by: Forgotten humanity, broken systems, and the role we can each play in ending homelessness in America. North Atlantic Books.</li> <li>• Desmond, M. (2016). Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city. Crown.</li> <li>• Kendi, I.X. (2019). How to be an anti-racist. One World.</li> <li>• Larkin, H., Aykanian, A., &amp; Streeter, C. L. (Eds.). (2019). Homelessness prevention and intervention in social work: Policies, programs, and practices. Springer.</li> <li>• NASW Code of Ethics</li> <li>• Weekly readings as assigned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dominelli, L. (2002). Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice. Palgrave Macmillan.</li> <li>• DSM-V</li> <li>• National Alliance to End Homelessness (2025). Housing-Focused Street Outreach Framework. (free, downloadable)</li> <li>• Olivet et al. (2021). Racial inequity and homelessness: Findings from the SPARC Study. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.</li> <li>• Sweet, V. (2012). God's hotel: A doctor, a hospital, and a pilgrimage to the heart of medicine. Riverhead Books.</li> </ul>

**"The opposite of poverty is not wealth. The opposite of poverty is justice." — Bryan Stevenson**

<b>Learning Experiences:</b>	<b>Grading Criteria:</b> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weekly class – lecture, large group discussion, small group discussion</li> <li>• Biweekly reflection journals</li> <li>• Three guest speakers – one on client work, one on coalition building, one on policy</li> <li>• Presentation on VoiceThread</li> <li>• Op-Ed</li> <li>• Final Paper</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pass: 70-100 points</li> <li>• Fail: 0-69 points</li> <li>• Incomplete: n/a</li> </ul>



## Assignments

## Due Date / Points

### Class Participation:

- Students are expected to come to class ready to participate. Participation does not only mean speaking out loud. Each class will include anonymous surveys, pair shares, and personal reflection.

Every week  
2 points each  
16 points total

### Reflection Journals:

- Journals, 300-500 words, are designed to help students partake in personal, critical reflection. Each journal assignment will include a different prompt or activity to push critical self-reflexivity.

Every other week  
2 points each  
8 points total

### Presentation:

- Create a presentation for your peers using Powerpoint, Canva, or any other presentation creation platform. Locate 3-5 scholarly articles on an evidence-based intervention that would elevate services with PEH. Your presentation must include audio/video and be about five minutes in length.
- Comment on 2 of your peers' presentations, audio required, video optional. Aim for at least a three-minute response. Hosted on Voice Thread.
- SLO2 & SLO4

Due Week 3  
26 points

### Op-Ed:

- Identify a current policy related to homeless services. Students can locate current policies by reviewing government websites, press releases, news articles, or program guidelines. Students will write a 600-800 word op-ed intended for a general audience.
- The op-ed should integrate course framework and two sources. Students will show they are able to analyze policy that translates into public advocacy.
- SLO3




Due Week 5  
20 points

### Final Paper:

- Use an antiracist framework to explore any topic related to homelessness, whether it is an intervention, program, agency creation, coalition building, budget recommendation, etc. Include at least 3 scholarly references. 3-5 pages.
- SLO1 & SLO4

Due Week 8  
30 points

# Course Expectations & Requirements

<b>Attendance and Participation</b>	<b>Community Agreements</b>
<p>This course meets weekly for the duration of the semester. Students are expected to arrive each week with assigned readings and viewings completed and ready to engage. One absence is permitted without academic penalty; further absences will result in a loss of participation points. In a course that touches on poverty, race, trauma, and structural inequity, students are expected to engage in all discussions with humility and a sustained awareness of their impact on others. Particularly for students with privileged identities, the first consideration in any discussion must be to do no harm.</p>	 <p>During our first session, we will co-create a set of community agreements that will govern how we engage with one another and with the material throughout the course. These agreements belong to all of us. They will remain visible in the classroom and will serve as an active reference point if discussion becomes tense or difficult. Students are asked to bring their full selves to this course while honoring the norms we build together.</p>
<b>Engagement with Course Content</b>	 <b>Late Work</b>
<p>We will engage with difficult material and the reality of how systems constantly and intentionally oppress those who are poor, people of color, disabled, and without secure housing. This course welcomes the tension and discomfort that comes with that engagement, to spark illuminating thoughts, surface innovative ideas, and challenge those who have not personally lived with these realities. We will honor and center the experiences of people without housing, whether those experiences are shared directly in the classroom or encountered through course content.</p>	<p>Assignments are due by 11:59 PM on the designated due date. Late work is accepted with a deduction of 5% points per day. If you anticipate difficulty meeting a deadline, contact the instructor at least 24 hours in advance. Extensions are granted at the instructor's discretion. Do not wait until after a deadline has passed to communicate.</p>
 <b>Ethical Conduct</b>	<b>Use of AI</b>
<p>Students are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the NASW Code of Ethics, including respect for human dignity, commitment to social justice, and integrity, for the duration of this course, as is expected in any professional setting.</p>	<p>AI tools may be used for idea generation, sounding out arguments, or improving the clarity of originally written work. AI may not be used to generate submitted work in whole or in part.</p>

# Weekly Course Schedule

	Theme	Objectives	Required Readings	Assignments Due
<b>Week 1</b>	Foundations of Homelessness	<p>Establish community agreements.</p> <p>Understand the context for homelessness in America.</p> <p>Examine personal biases and identities.</p>	Adler et al. (2023), selected chapters; Grand Challenges for Social Work – End Homelessness	<p>Class participation</p> <p>Reflection Journal</p>
<b>Week 2</b>	Systemic Oppression and Housing	<p>Analyze policies and their impact on communities' ability to access housing.</p> <p>Understand how racism operates across ecological levels.</p> <p>Connect policy-level to client-level experiences.</p>	Kendi (2019), selected chapters; Desmond (2016), selected chapters	Class participation
<b>Week 3</b>	Evidence-Based Interventions	<p>Identify and describe the approaches to homelessness based on research.</p> <p>Locate relevant articles in scholarly research.</p> <p>Engage with the guest speaker, an expert clinician with 15 years experience in the field.</p>	Larkin et al. (2019), selected chapters; CWSE Learning Academy	<p>Class participation</p> <p>Reflection Journal</p> <p>Presentation</p>
<b>Week 4</b>	Social Work Assessment in Nontraditional Settings	<p>Develop skills to perform engagements and assessments outside of traditional settings.</p> <p>Apply a trauma-informed care lens to street-based care.</p>	Larkin et al. (2019), selected chapters; NAEH Housing-Focused Street Outreach Framework	Class participation

# Weekly Course Schedule (cont.)

	Theme	Objectives	Required Readings	Assignments Due
<b>Week 5</b>	Connecting Client Barriers to Policy Change	<p>Understand local government structures and how they feed into local policies.</p> <p>Think critically about client barriers to stabilization and what pathways exist to remove the barriers.</p> <p>Engage with the guest speaker, local politician liaison to the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing.</p>	Desmond (2016), selected chapters; Kendi (2019), selected chapters	<p>Class participation</p> <p>Reflection Journal</p> <p>Op-Ed</p>
<b>Week 6</b>	Intersectionality and Tailored Interventions	<p>Examine how race, gender, class, ability, nationality, and other identities impact a client's ability to access services.</p> <p>Center lived experiences of clients within the system and with providers.</p>	Adler et al. (2023), selected chapters; Olivet et al. (2021)	Class participation
<b>Week 7</b>	Coalition Building and Advocacy Approaches	<p>Examine the positionality and impact of community organizers, advocates, and coalitions.</p> <p>Reflect on the dynamic of working within systems and challenging them.</p> <p>Engage with the guest speaker, the executive director of Coalition on Homelessness.</p>	Larkin et al. (2019), selected chapters; Kendi (2019), selected chapters	<p>Class participation</p> <p>Reflection Journal</p>
<b>Week 8</b>	Practitioner Identity and Looking Ahead	<p>Reflect on how your identity intersects with bring a practitioner, coalition builder, or policymaker for those experiencing homelessness.</p> <p>Think critically about innovative approaches to client care or systems change.</p>	Adler et al. (2023), selected chapters; Larkin et al. (2019), selected chapters; Kendi (2019), selected chapters	<p>Class participation</p> <p>Final Paper</p>

# University Policies and Resources

<b>University Library Services</b>	<b>Writing Assistance</b>
<p>The University Libraries welcomes all learners to engage with the Library system. We work with students and faculty in face-to-face, online, and hybrid or blended instructional settings. You can learn more about the services offered to students, faculty and staff on the library services page.</p>	<p>The Writing Center offers virtual workshops on plagiarism, APA style, and MLA style. You can access these workshops by signing into Blackboard. At any point in the writing process, a writing consultant can help you via e-mail or chat with you one-on-one in a real-time chat room.</p>
<b>Title IX/Clery Act Notification</b>	<b>Sexual Harassment</b>
<p>Sexual misconduct (including sexual harassment, sexual assault, and any other nonconsensual behavior of a sexual nature) and sex discrimination violate University policies. Students experiencing such behavior may obtain confidential support from the Counseling Services. To report sexual misconduct or sex discrimination, contact the Dean of Students or the Police.</p> <p>Disclosure to University faculty or instructors of sexual misconduct, domestic violence, dating violence, or sex discrimination occurring on campus, in a University-sponsored program, or involving a campus visitor or University student or employee (whether current or former) is not confidential under Title IX. Faculty and instructors must forward such reports, including names and circumstances, to the University's Title IX officer.</p>	<p>The University strives to maintain the campus free of all forms of illegal discrimination as a place of work and study for faculty, staff, and students. Sexual harassment is unacceptable and unlawful conduct and will not be tolerated in the workplace and the educational environment. Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment, even when carried out through computers or other electronic communications systems.</p> <p>I believe that everyone should be able to participate in my class without the fear of sexual harassment, and I am committed to the university's policy. Additionally, certain behaviors are inappropriate even if they do not meet the technical criteria for harassment. Be respectful to each other.</p>
<b>Disability Statement</b>	<b>Academic Integrity Statement</b>
<p>The University is committed to providing access to programs and services for qualified students with disabilities. If you are a student with a disability and require accommodation to participate and complete requirements for this class, notify me immediately and contact the Disability Resource Center for verification of eligibility and determination of specific accommodations.</p>	<p>The University wants all students to participate fully and honorably in the learning process. Integrity is a core social work value. The University holds not only students to a high standard, but the staff and administration as well. All assignments should be original work for this course. Students should not submit work that is not their own, including submitting work from previous courses, cheating, direct pulls from AI, and plagiarism. The University scans all work for generation using AI and if your work receives a high score, you may be asked to redo the assignment.</p>

# Course Bibliography

Gray-Garcia, L. (2006). Criminal of poverty: Growing up homeless in America. City Lights Books.

Hopper, K. (2003). Reckoning with homelessness. Cornell University Press.

Larkin, H., Aykanian, A., & Streeter, C. L. (Eds.). (2019). Homelessness prevention and intervention in social work: Policies, programs, and practices. Springer.

Padgett, D. K., Henwood, B. F., & Tsemberis, S. J. (2016). Housing First: Ending homelessness, transforming systems, and changing lives. Oxford University Press.

Rothstein, R. (2017). The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America. Liveright.

Rowe, M. (1999). Crossing the border: Encounters between homeless people and outreach workers. University of California Press.

Willse, C. (2015). The value of homelessness: Managing surplus life in the United States. University of Minnesota Press.