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Introduction

This report is prepared on behalf of the Michigan Holistic Defense Fellowship Board of Directors to provide insight into the strategies and trends that defined the program’s third year of social work student recruitment for the upcoming 2026 Fellowship season. This report is organized into three sections that include the recruitment strategies for this set of applicants, a demographic analysis of the students who applied and were accepted into the 2026 Social Work Fellow cohort, and conclusions on the 2026 Social Work Fellow recruitment strategy.

The data presented in this report is sourced from the required Google Form portion of the application and the finalized list of candidates who have been accepted into the 2026 Social Work Fellowship cohort. Of the 16 students who applied to the 2026 Social Work Fellowship through the Google Form, 13 students submitted all of the required supplemental materials and were considered for placement.

2026 Social Work Fellowship Advertising and Applicant Recruitment Strategies

Direct Recruitment

Direct recruitment tactics require that an individual involved with the Fellowship (Director or Placement Site staff) partner with a particular school or networking body to present the Fellowship directly to a group of potential applicants. The Director presented to social work students at Hope College, Wayne State University, and Northern Michigan University.

The presentation at Hope College was the first of its kind and originated due to a relationship between Hope College and Allegan County, which served as a placement site in 2024 and 2025. For this presentation, the Director collaborated with Dr. Dennis Feaster and Professor Catherine Lafler. The Director was invited to present to two classes of Hope College Bachelor of Social Work students; one group of students were juniors, and one group were seniors in their field seminar class. The Director presented the Fellowship to both classes separately and answered student questions after each presentation was over. Approximately 35 students were presented to between the two classes.

The presentation at Wayne State University was provided to Master of Social Work students in Dr. Athena Kheibari’s winter semester class. Several of the students in this class were also in the mixed class of law and social work students in Athena and Dan Ellman’s Fall semester holistic defense class, making this Winter semester presentation on the Fellowship the second that students had seen. The Director was joined by Theresa Cipponeri, LMSW-C who leads mitigation services at Macomb County Office of the

Public Defender. As is traditional in these presentations, the Director and Theresa answered student questions following the presentation. Approximately 20 students were in this class.

The presentation at Northern Michigan University was scheduled to conflict with the presentation at Wayne State University, so the Director recorded a presentation on the Fellowship and application process, and the recording was shared with students in Jessica Olson’s (LMSW-C) class.

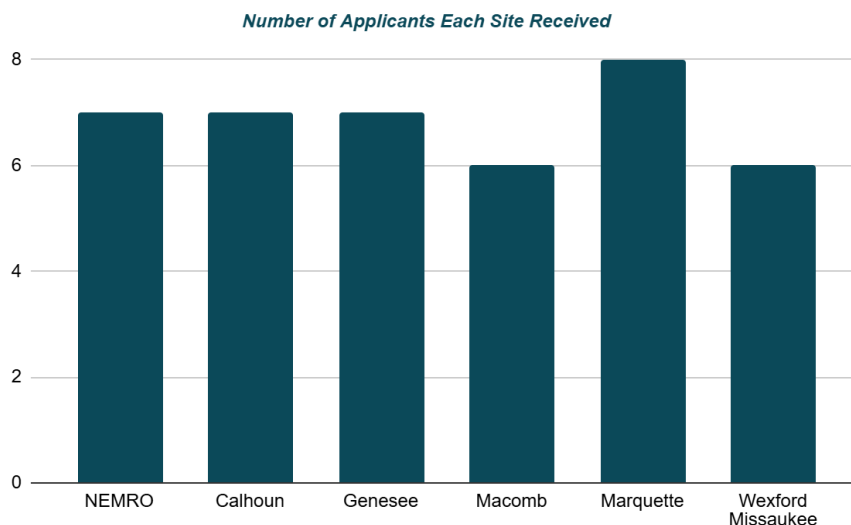
Indirect Recruitment

Indirect recruitment strategies describe the use of passive advertisements posted to online career and intern webpages intended for social work students. This involves the posting of the Fellowship background and application instructions on college or university career webpages and is completed by the Director. For the 2026 Social Work Fellow recruitment season, the Director advertised the Fellowship on the career webpage of every accredited social work school in Michigan for a total of 21 schools¹. This is the same list and number of schools that the 2025 Social Work Fellow recruitment season advertised with.

The 2026 Social Work Fellowship was also advertised on the career pages of the National Association for Public Defense, the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission, and the National Association of Social Work.

2026 Social Work Fellowship Applicant Cohort Trends

Number of Applicants per Placement Site

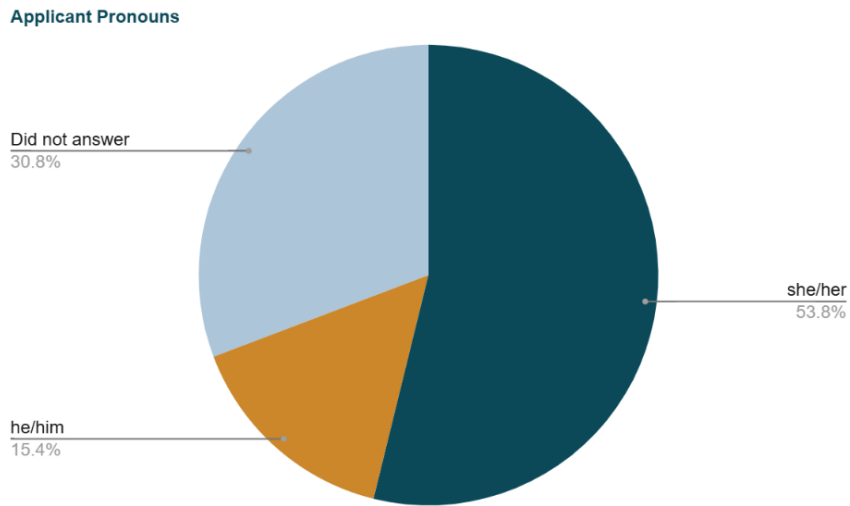


All six Placement Sites received between 6 – 8 applicants this cycle, which is significantly fewer than in previous application cycles². Due to the reduced number of applicants, site staff were encouraged to weigh whether an applicant applied to multiple sites or just their site during the ranking process.

¹ Adrian College, Andrews University, Calvin University, Central Michigan University, Cornerstone University, Eastern Michigan University, Ferris State University, Grand Valley State University, Hope College, Kuyper College, Madonna University, Michigan State University, Northern Michigan University, Oakland University, Saginaw Valley State University, Sienna Heights University, Spring Arbor University, University of Detroit Mercy, University of Michigan, University of Olivet, Wayne State University

² In 2026, sites received 9 – 22 social work applicants.

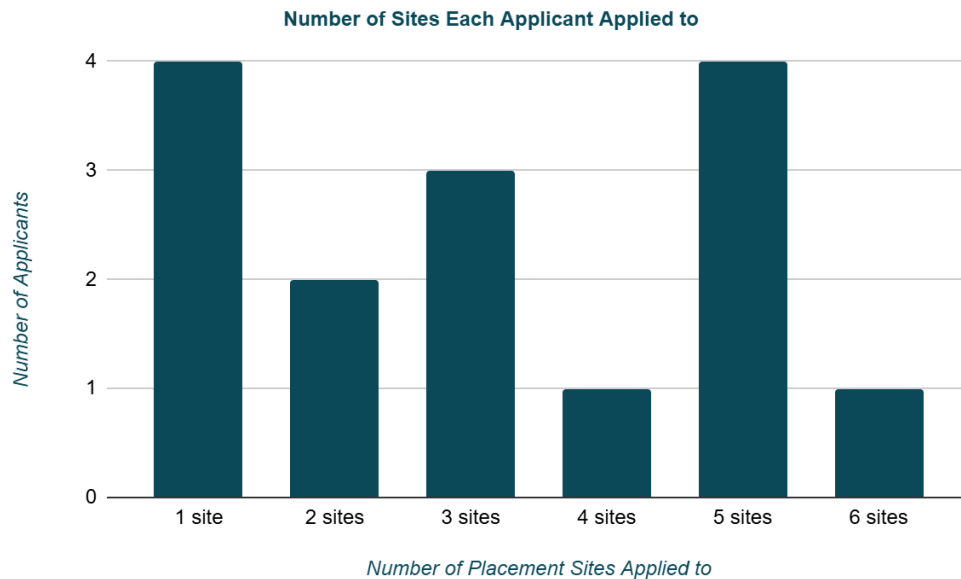
Applicant Pronouns



Voluntary applicant pronoun information is collected during the application process and is provided to placement sites in the application package to prevent the misgendering of prospective candidates during the interview process. This was the first year that the Director made answering this question optional.

In the accepted 2026 Social Work Fellow cohort, 83% of fellows use she/her pronouns and 17% of fellows use he/him pronouns.

Number of Sites Applicants Applied to

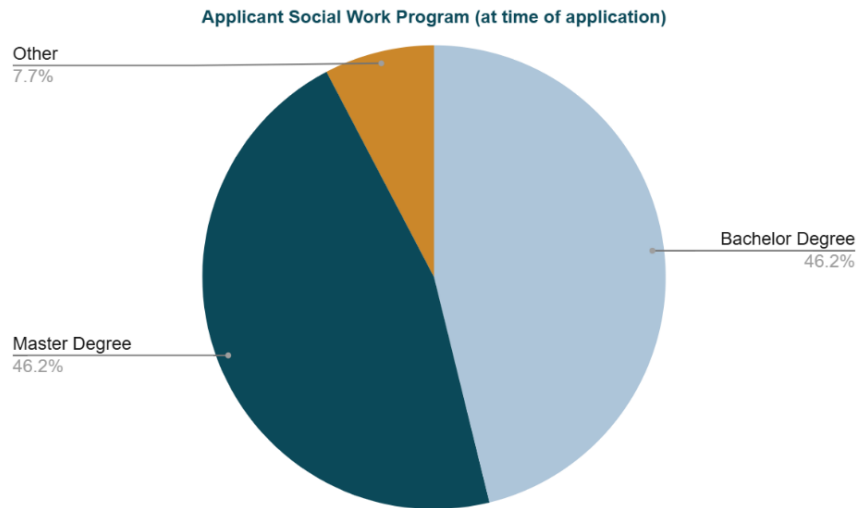


Social Work students are strongly encouraged to apply for placement at each site that they are interested in and that they are prepared to relocate to, if applicable, for the summer. In the 2026 Social Work Fellow applicant cohort, most students applied to multiple sites. This is a prevailing trend for all application cycles

across law students and social work students. Placement Sites have historically expressed a preference to filter applicants in part by their selectivity and preference for fewer sites.

Successful applicants who were accepted into the 2026 cohort were not consistent with each other in the number of sites they applied to. 50% of accepted social work applicants applied to five sites, and 17% of accepted social work applicants applied each to one, two, and six sites.

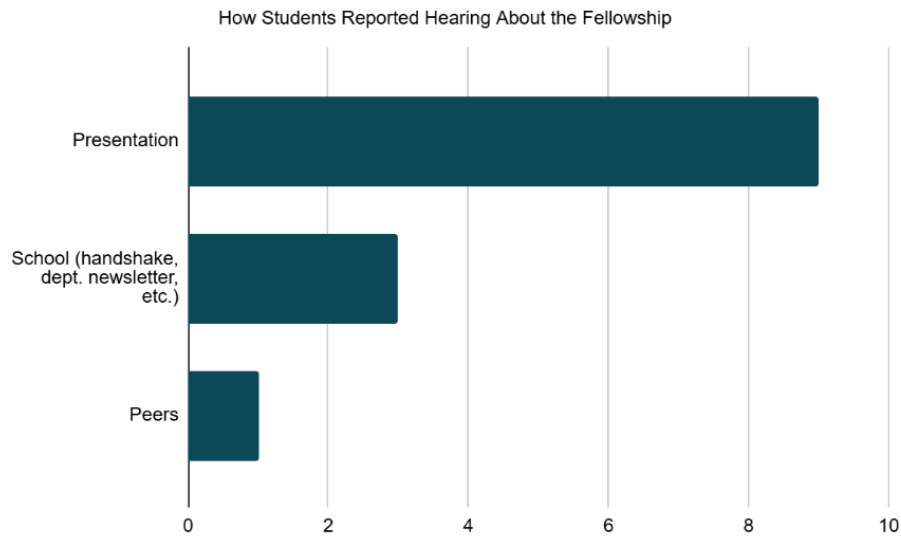
Applicant Social Work Degree Level



The 2026 Social Work Fellow applicant program category saw equal numbers of students enrolled in Bachelor and Master of Social Work programs at the time of application. One student in undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan, which does not offer a BSW program, was enrolled in a degree program designed to mimic a BSW curriculum at the time of application.

50% of the accepted social work fellow cohort was enrolled in a BSW program at the time of application, and 33% were enrolled in an MSW program. 17% of the accepted cohort is enrolled in an alternative program designed to mimic a BSW degree and intends to pursue an MSW.

How Applicants Heard About the Fellowship



Each year, applicants are required to provide a short-form answer about how they heard about the Fellowship. Students from this application cycle reported hearing about the 2026 Social Work Fellowship through attending a presentation by the Director (69%), seeing the Fellowship advertised on their school’s online job board or other online search (23%), and through peer word-of-mouth (8%). Presentations continue to be the highest reported means that law and social work applicants hear about the program.

50% of the accepted 2026 Social Work Fellow cohort heard about the Fellowship by attending a Director presentation. 33% of accepted students heard about the Fellowship through their school’s Handshake platform or departmental newsletter, and 17% reported hearing about the Fellowship from a peer.

Applicants by School

School	Applicants
Hope College* (6)	46%
Wayne State University* (4)	30%
Northern Michigan University* (1)	8%
University of Michigan (1)	8%
New Mexico Highlands University (1)	8%

**Denotes schools where direct outreach took place*

84% of all applicants in this cycle are enrolled at schools where a Director presentation occurred. The program continues to primarily attract students who are enrolled in a social work program based in Michigan. Despite the allowance of graduated, non-student applicants into the Fellowship’s annual social work cohort, the program has not received a social work applicant who is not enrolled in school at the time of application in its history.

Three (50%) of accepted 2026 social work fellows are enrolled at Hope College. Of the remaining cohort, one each are from Wayne State University, Northern Michigan University, and the University of Michigan.

2026 Social Work Application Cycle Conclusions

This cycle saw the lowest number of applicants since the program's conception in 2024. The 2025 social work applicant cohort had 36 candidates, which is nearly triple the number of applicants seen this cycle. Of the 36 social work applicants in 2025, 19 came from Northern Michigan University (12) and Grand Valley State University (7), whereas the 2026 applicant cohort had only one applicant from Northern Michigan University and zero applicants from GVSU. The main difference in application numbers may be attributable to a changed presentation format at Northern Michigan University (pre-recorded, autonomous viewing) and no presentation at GVSU, where Allegan County had presented the Fellowship in 2025. With Director presentations consistently reported as the primary means that applicants hear about the Fellowship season over season, the clear objective of 2027 is to increase the number and impact of in-person presentations.

There are at least two additional factors to consider that impacted this recruitment cycle. The early application timeline this season was likely to the program's detriment, and so was the limiting idea that presentations can or should only occur in the month leading up to the application period. This cycle's application opened on January 23rd, just 1 - 2 weeks after the start of the semester. The start of Winter semester is universally dedicated to clearing the mental cobwebs that accumulate over winter break, and professors and students alike have not yet hit the stride of the semester. It is challenging to ask professors to allocate their class time to a presentation when they are still establishing a routine with students, and it is an equally challenging time to net student motivation to lock down a summer position. Adjusting the application period to start later and presenting to classes of social work students the Fall semester before may help avoid these particular drivers of low recruitment in 2027.

Food for Thought

This recruitment cycle accepted applications for a window that was just shy of four weeks in length. The program could continue to aim for four weeks as the length of time advertised to students that they can submit their application materials. Given that students are not sufficiently embedded in the rhythm of the semester in January to look ahead to summer prospects, this program should be presented in Fall semester and mid-Winter semester. This approach will need to strike a careful balance that avoids pushing the application back so far that accepted students are unable to secure summer housing due to insufficient notice. This is particularly critical for fellows who are accepted to northern placement sites where the summer rental market is competitive and expensive.

Who Should the Social Work Fellowship Recruit in 2027?

The 2027 Social Work Fellowship requires a recruitment strategy that triples the applicant pool. Mitigation professionals in Michigan and at Fellowship placement sites have varied professional and educational backgrounds that shape how each public defender office approaches their mitigation practice. For this reason, the program needs an applicant pool that is diverse in their professional and educational backgrounds.

Overall, sites have expressed a desire for candidates with more experience who have prior social work placement experience. The Fellowship receives significant interest from student candidates who have not yet had any field experience, and the program will continue to recruit those candidates to the applicant pool. The missing component from the current applicant pool is a higher proportion of MSW-level students. In 2027, a robust portion of these MSW applicants needs to be interested in rural practice

locations for their prospective Fellowship summer. Recruiting at schools in rural areas (GVSU) or who have large student bodies that come from all over the state (MSU) may support this goal. Given the sustained trend that director presentations continue to be the most popular way that applicants hear about and come to apply to the Fellowship, the Director will present at an increased number of schools for the 2027 social work application cycle. Next year, the Director will coordinate presentations at Hope College and at MSW programs at Northern Michigan University, Wayne State University, Michigan State University Saginaw Valley State University, Grand Valley State University, and Spring Arbor University.