

NEWSLETTER



Congratulations, BSW & MSW Class of 2025!

You rose to every challenge. You led with heart, strength, and purpose.
Now, you're ready to change the world — HAIL STATE!

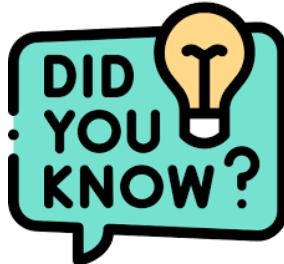
We are proud. We are inspired. We are VSU Social Work!

Words from the Field



"My time at Open Arms Family Services deeply influenced my understanding of the social service field and reinforced my commitment to making a meaningful impact in people's lives."

- Monesha Wright MSW '25



The first social work internships in the U.S. were created in the early 1900s at places like the New York School of Philanthropy — and students weren't just placed randomly; they were often sent to settlement houses to live among the communities they served!



"My experience at RDSS has been invaluable,...I've received immense support and guidance from my field supervisor, Shaleash Williams, and Ria Thweatt. I am deeply grateful for the opportunities I've been given as an intern."

- Ceonna Elam MSW '25

Congratulations to Professor Kevin Holder



Prof. Holder & Mom - "The educator of my life" - says Prof. Holder

The Department of Social Work proudly congratulates Professor Kevin Holder, on being named the 2025 National Association of Black Social Workers (NABS) Educator of the Year.

This prestigious national honor recognizes Professor Holder's outstanding commitment to advancing social work education, empowering future practitioners, and promoting social justice within the Black community and beyond. His passion for teaching, mentorship, and advocacy exemplifies the highest ideals of our profession. We are honored to have Professor Holder as a valued member of the Virginia State University social work faculty and celebrate this well-deserved recognition of his excellence.

Congratulations, Professor Holder — your VSU family is proud of you!

TEAM HIGHLIGHTS



Professor Kevin Holder

Mr. Kevin Holder facilitated a workshop on licensure at the Virginia Social Work Education Consortium's Rally in the Valley Conference on Friday, March 28th, in Harrisonburg, Virginia.



Dr. Dee Lucombe MSW Director of Field Education

The Social Work Department proudly congratulates Dr. Dee Lucombe on her appointment to the Commonwealth of Virginia's Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) Waiver Slot Assignment Committee. In this role, Dr. Lucombe will use her expertise to support Virginians through the Medicaid Waiver Program, which provides essential care for individuals with developmental disabilities. Dr. Lucombe, who also created the child welfare grant in partnership with the Virginia Department of Social Services—offering tuition assistance, resources for 12 students, and guaranteed state employment—is honored to continue serving Virginia's residents. Her appointment reflects VSU's commitment to leadership, advocacy, and community service.



Dr. Christin Haynes

Dr. Haynes has been awarded a Community Seed grant from the Massey Cancer Center to support her innovative program, Nourishing Traditions. The initiative is designed to focus on Black male cancer survivors and their Black female caregivers, providing specialized interventions aimed at reducing cancer-related mortality and morbidity in Petersburg. This grant represents a significant step forward in our ongoing commitment to advancing community health and tailored care.



Professor Jacquelyn Cowan

Professor Jacqueline Cowan will be speaking at the upcoming National Association of Social Workers – VA Chapter Conference, scheduled for March 13-15, 2025. Her presentation, titled Supporting African American Caregivers and Those with Dementia: The Social Worker's Role, will explore the unique challenges faced by African American caregivers and highlight the critical role social workers play in supporting individuals with dementia. Join us in celebrating this important contribution to advancing culturally responsive social work practice.



Dr. Brittany Short BSW Program Director

Dr. Short, current Vice-President of the Virginia Social Work Education Consortium (VSWEC) for the 2024-2026 Biennium, collaborating with like-minded academics to advance innovative social work education across Virginia. In March 2025, attended the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors Conference. Along with Dr. Walton, their participation underscores our ongoing commitment to excellence and progress in social work education.



The Change Makers MSW Club

During the 2024 Thanksgiving season, the Change Makers MSW Club at VSU partnered with the Mark Matthews Chapter of the Buffalo Soldiers to support families in need. Led by President Makayla Crawford and MSW Director of Field Education, Dr. Lucombe (above), the club collected canned goods, turkeys, and non-perishables from the VSU community. Their efforts culminated in a cheerful delivery at the Washington Street donation site, spreading hope and warmth throughout the area.



The Association of Black Social Workers

The ABSW Club (above) has been busy making a difference in our community. On January 23, members donated essential items to a local Goodwill, followed by a trash pick-up initiative on February 9 at Howard and Branch Hall. Their commitment continued on March 2 with a cleanup effort by the overlook, underscoring ABSW's dedication to service and community improvement.



The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) was founded in 1967 - breaking away from the NASW to address systemic racism within the profession.



Anaya Allen (left), a graduating BSW senior recently completed an enriching internship with Communities In Schools of Richmond. During this experience, she collaborated with Art 180 to help connect students with valuable artistic resources. Through this partnership, students of various grade levels were able to express their creativity, passion, and individuality through art. Photo (right to left) Anaya, her field supervisor, and the Art 180 Director and staff



Ecological Systems Theory was originally created by a psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 to study child development. Social workers adopted it because it perfectly fit our "person-in-environment" lens.

VSU ABSW President, Javien Rountree (right) represented VSU at the Richmond ABSW workshop. The event featured sessions for both local and national chapters, with student representatives from VCU and VUU chapters also in attendance.



BSW Junior Louise Taylor (above) is actively engaging in valuable opportunities within her internship



Freshman BSW student **Adjoa Williams** (above) proudly represented our program at the 2025 Undergraduate Research Conference. Her research focused on identifying adaptive and maladaptive strategies related to math anxiety, showcasing her dedication to understanding the emotional and behavioral factors that impact academic success.

BSW Juniors (left) gathered for prayer and worship - receiving heartfelt blessings and as they celebrated the completion of the semester and preparation for their upcoming senior year.

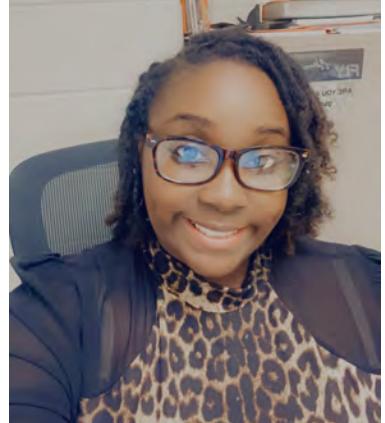


THANK YOU PROFESSOR THORNTON!!!!

BSW Professor Keneshia Thornton (left) guided seniors on a tour of the Fort Monroe Visitor & Education Center. The trip offered valuable insight into cultural history and its connection to today's social justice issues.



Above are awardees from the Spring 2025 Phi Alpha Induction and Awards Ceremony, celebrating both our BSW and MSW cohorts - honoring academic excellence, leadership, and the commitment to the values of the social work profession.



We proudly celebrate Ms. Danisha Stephens (right), a dedicated online MSW student, who earned her Master's in Special Education from Longwood University in August 2024 — while balancing the MSW, and her professional, and personal life. Her dedication and perseverance are truly inspiring. Please join us in congratulating her on this incredible achievement!



Social work students and faculty representing at the Spring Rally in the Valley in Harrisonburg, VA. It was a great opportunity for connection, advocacy, and celebrating the spirit of social work!



Attachment Theory, widely used in trauma and child welfare social work today, was built after studying children separated during World War II.
(John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in the 1940s and 1950s.)

DEPARTMENT UPDATES



Master of Social Work Achieves Full Accreditation

We are pleased to celebrate that our Master's of Social Work program has received full accreditation by the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE). This significant achievement is a culmination of almost 5-years of commitment, hard work, and dedication by the Department of Social Work, The College and Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the University. Virginia State University now houses the first trauma-informed MSW at an HBCU!

Greater is Happening HERE



Over the past five years, Virginia State University BSW and MSW student-interns have contributed an astonishing **147,000 hours** of service to community agencies.

That's an estimated **\$4+ million** worth of professional work — all while gaining vital real-world experience in the community.

Our future social workers are not just learning; they're making a real impact!



WELCOME TO THE TEAM!

Professor Saundra Collier! With over 30 years of experience in human services, she currently serves as a foster care supervisor at the City of Richmond Department of Social Services, advocating for vulnerable children and families. Her extensive background in the field will bring invaluable knowledge and expertise to the MSW program.



Professor Hyisheem Calier! An alumnus of our BSW program, graduating in 2015, Professor Calier is also a lawyer and an MSW professor. As a first-generation law student, he has a passion for advocating for justice and supporting others. We are excited to have him back in the MSW program, bringing his unique expertise and experiences to our community!

Professor LaTonya Ayres! With over 10 years of clinical experience in treating substance use disorders, eating disorders, trauma, and mood disorders, Professor Ayres is excited to bring her practice experience to the classroom. Although new to teaching, she has supervised MSW students in field placements and is currently licensed as an LCSW in Virginia. Outside of her professional work, she is a wife, mother of two, and dog mom to four. We're thrilled to have her join the MSW program!





Professor Lesa Monroe! An experienced LCSW, Professor Monroe has over a decade of service in mental health and veteran services. She currently works as a Mental Health Intensive Case Management Clinical Social Worker at the Central Texas Health Care System, specializing in supporting veterans with severe mental illnesses. We are excited to have her knowledge and experience added to our MSW program!



Dr. Shenita E. Williams! A dedicated professional with 20+ years of experience in social work and more than 25 years as a school social worker. Dr. Williams has made significant contributions to supporting Black students' mental health in school settings. A three-time graduate of VCU, where she holds a BSW, MSW, and a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership, Policy, and Justice. Her research focuses on enhancing school-based mental health services, with an emphasis on policy, practice, and the professional development of mental health practitioners in schools.



We are excited to welcome Professor Lenise Mazyck, LCSW, to our community! She is a LCSW in both Virginia and Washington, DC, and brings a wealth of experience in trauma-informed care, grief, and the impact of nutrition on the brain. As the owner of Roots to Results Counseling and CEO of Rooted in Connections, LLC, Professor Mazyck is passionate about holistic healing and advocating for neurodiverse individuals, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. We are thrilled that she will share her knowledge and passion with our students!

The 2025 Social Work Graduating Class

Global. Innovative. Connected. Leaders.

Bachelor of Social Work Graduating Class

Allen, Anaya
Bonner, Rhacquel
Darrington, Hailey
Ebuchulam, Catelynn
Foster, Jayana
Harris, Unique
Johnson, Jala
Kauffman, Elder
Keller, Aneyka
Kemp, Janiyah
Lopez Trejo, Francisco
McBride, Kanika
McCaskill, Renille
Mitchell, Kierra
Morris, Keanna
Mosely, Lah'rina
Palmer, Zikala
Parker, DaiJane
Parker, Jenessis
Pierce, Jayda
Poole, Justina
Pritchett, Tiara
Rawlings, Takhyla
Simms, Kamryn
Tanveer, Gina
Ward, Miracle
Wells, Keshawn
Winston, Lynnecha

Master of Social Work Graduating Class

Bell, Yolanda
Crawford, Makayla
Elam, Ceonna
Fields, Lauren
Hawthorne, Yvette
Johnson, Crystal
Lundy, Alexis
Mathura, Brianna
Stephens, Danisha
Watts, Corrine
Winfield, Jordan
Witter, Tanisha
Wright, Monesha
Zamudio, Phoebe

A Letter From Your Chair

Dear Class of 2025

On behalf of the Department of Social Work, it is with immense pride and heartfelt congratulations that I celebrate you today. You have reached a milestone that stands as a testament to your resilience, your unwavering focus, and your tireless pursuit of excellence.

We know that this journey was not an easy one. Along the way, you faced personal trials, professional demands, and academic challenges that tested your strength and resolve. Yet through it all, you persevered. You rose to each occasion with courage, with heart, and with the unshakable spirit of a Trojan.

But let me be clear—this moment, though powerful, is not the culmination of your journey. It is only the beginning. Today, you step into the world as part of an elite family of Virginia State University Trojans, following in the footsteps of extraordinary social workers who once sat where you sat, who once wrestled with the same doubts and dreams you have conquered. They stood before you as mentors, professors, and leaders—watching your spark grow into a raging flame of knowledge, purpose, and power.

Now, it is your turn.

You are not merely graduates. You are innovative thinkers. You are global citizens. You are connected and courageous leaders. You are autonomous professionals prepared to influence, inspire, and transform the world around you.

You are Social Workers.
You are Virginia State University.
You are Trojans.
You are Pride.
You are Graduates.

Congratulations, Class of 2025! We believe in you—and we can't wait to see how brightly you will light the world.

With Trojan Pride,
Dr. J.D. Fedrick

Upcoming Events

Mar 24 - May 6 - Fall Registration
Contact Ms. Bishop for assistance

May 14 - Pinning Ceremony May 14

May 17 - Commencement

Aug 18 - Fall Classes Begin

Social Work Orgs

The Social Work Club (BSW Club)

The Change Makers (MSW Club)

The VSU ABSW (BSW & MSW Students)

The Phi Alpha Honor Society (GPA Requirements)

For more info, contact Ms. Bishop, Dr. Short or Dr. Younger

Mental Health Resources

Mental health is vital to your overall well-being! On and off campus supports are available:

The Counseling Center provides **up to eight free visits per semester**. Make an appointment (804) 524-5939 or visit the 4th floor of Memorial Hall.

District 19 Community Services Board (CSB)
20 West Bank Street
Petersburg, VA 23803
(804) 862-8002
24-hour Crisis Line: (804) 862-8000 or
toll free: (866) 365-2130.

The James House

24/7 Crisis Support is (804) 458-2840.
Need immediate assistance? Call 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

LEADERSHIP

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EDITORS NOTE

As my time as a Graduate Assistant comes to a close after two wonderful semesters, I'm filled with deep gratitude. The journey toward earning my MSW has been both challenging and rewarding, and I'm incredibly thankful for every experience, lesson, and connection along the way. Social work is more than a profession—it's a calling rooted in compassion, justice, and the unwavering belief in the power of change. Here's to continuing the work that uplifts and empowers.

With gratitude,
Brianna A. Mathura

You know you're a social work student when...

- ✓ You carry snacks and crisis resources in the same bag.
- ✓ You write self-care plans you don't have time to follow.
- ✓ You diagnose yourself and your family by the end of the first semester.



How many social workers does it take to change a light bulb?

One. But the lightbulb has to want to change.

Share Your Wins—We're Proud of You!

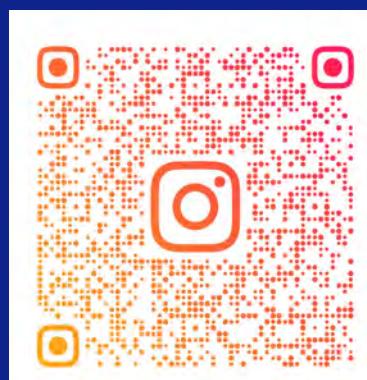
Your journey matters, and we want to celebrate it! Whether you've published research, launched an exciting project, received an award, reached a personal milestone, or simply have powerful moments captured in your work—we want to hear from you. Every achievement, big or small, inspires others in our social work community to keep pushing forward. Email your accomplishments and photos to socialworkprogram@vsu.edu—let's uplift each other and celebrate the impact we're making together!

Interested in Joining VSU?

Ready to become a part of Trojan Nation? Applying to Virginia State University is simple!

Visit www.vsu.edu/apply to start your application,

Stay connected!



Ethan Carter was the golden scholar of VSU's social work program. Professors raved about his impeccable writing, flawless discussion posts, and razor-sharp case analyses. His classmates whispered about how he always seemed to have the perfect answer in class. What they didn't know—what no one knew—was that Ethan had a secret weapon. Meet Ava the Academic Assistant, an AI chatbot that had essentially earned Ethan's degree for him.

From the moment he discovered Ava, Ethan's academic life had been a breeze. Need a discussion post? Ava had it covered. A research paper on trauma-informed care? Ava could generate ten polished pages in seconds. A reflection on ethical dilemmas? Ava made him sound like a seasoned clinician. Ethan saw no harm in it—after all, he still read Ava's work (sometimes) and wasn't understanding the material what really mattered?

By the time graduation rolled around, Ethan had a pristine 4.0 GPA, glowing letters of recommendation, and the ultimate prize—a dream job at the prestigious Horizon Hope Community Center, a top-tier agency. He had won the game. Or so he thought.

Day One: Welcome to Reality

Ethan stepped into his new office, feeling like a king. His nameplate gleamed on the door. His boss had already hinted at fast-tracking him for leadership. Then came his first real client. A woman named Ms. Rodriguez sat across from him, wiping away tears. "I don't know how to help my son," she said. "He just got back from deployment, and he won't talk to anyone. He won't eat. He won't sleep. I don't know what to do." Ethan smiled confidently. He had aced his military culture class (well, Ava had). "Of course, Ms. Rodriguez," Ethan said smoothly. "If you just give me a moment..." He reached for his phone. His fingers hovered over the screen, ready to ask Ava for guidance. Then it hit him. This wasn't a discussion board. This wasn't a multiple-choice quiz. This was real life.

And for the first time in years, Ethan was on his own. His brain went blank. "Uh... have you... tried... talking to him?" Ethan stammered. Ms. Rodriguez squinted at him, confused. "Yes, of course I've tried talking to him. That's why I'm here!" she snapped. Ethan's throat went dry. He vaguely remembered something about motivational interviewing, CBT, and trauma-informed care, but... how did those actually work? What were he supposed to say? For the first time in his life, Ethan felt completely, utterly incompetent.

The Mockery Begins

Ethan's colleagues picked up on it fast. At first, they assumed he was just nervous. But after a few weeks of fumbling basic assessments, forgetting how to structure a treatment plan, and awkwardly sitting in silence during team meetings, the whispers began. "How did he even get hired here?" "I thought he had a 4.0? Guy can't even explain a simple intervention." "Bro must've paid someone to do his coursework." The most humiliating moment came when Jessica, a fellow new hire, casually asked him for his input during a clinical meeting. "Ethan, what do you think? How would you approach this case?" Ethan should have known the answer. Instead, he blurted out, "Uh... well... we should, you know, support the client... and, um, meet them where they are?" Dead silence.

Jessica frowned. "Right... but what intervention are you recommending?" Ethan's face turned crimson. The team waited. His supervisor raised an eyebrow. "I, uh, need to review my notes," he mumbled, feeling his stomach churn. Jessica forced a smile, but he could see the realization in her eyes. He had no idea what he was talking about.

The Inescapable Feeling of Inadequacy

Ethan started dreading work. Every time he walked into the office, he could feel the judgment. He began avoiding team discussions and staying silent in meetings. His once-pristine confidence was shattered. One day, he overheard two colleagues talking near the coffee machine. "You see Ethan's intake form?" one snickered. "Dude asked, 'How are you feeling today?' three times. Like, what is this—speed dating?" The other laughed. "I swear, I think he Googles everything before answering clients." Ethan's stomach dropped. That night, he sat in his apartment, staring at his degree on the wall. How did this happen? He had aced every class. He had graduated with honors. He had done everything right... But somehow, he knew nothing.

The Redemption Arc

Ethan had two choices: Fake it and risk getting fired. Own up to his shortcomings and learn—for real this time. For the first time, Ethan put in the real work.

He re-read his textbooks, cover to cover. He shadowed senior clinicians and asked for mentorship. He started practicing interventions instead of just memorizing them. He used AI ethically—as a learning tool, not a shortcut. Weeks later, he found himself sitting across from Ms. Rodriguez again. "I don't know how to help my son," she said. This time, Ethan didn't panic. He leaned in, listening fully. "That sounds really painful," he said softly. "Tell me more about what you've noticed." Ms. Rodriguez blinked, caught off guard. "I... I don't know. He just shuts down." Ethan nodded. "That must be really hard for both of you. Let's talk about what's worked before, and what hasn't. We can figure this out together." For the first time, Ethan wasn't faking it. And that made all the difference.

Moral of the Story

AI is not a replacement for real learning. You can graduate with a perfect GPA... You can land the perfect job... You can fool people for a while... But if you don't do the work, it will catch up to you. Because at the end of the day, social work isn't about having perfect discussion posts—it's about being present, engaged, and capable.

