

ASU honors Sun Devils, local organizations with Social Work Month Awards

School of Social Work presents Legacy Award to alum who earned one of its first MSW degrees in 1965

By Mark J. Scarp, ASU News

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Arizona State University's [School of Social Work](#) recently honored a total of 29 students, faculty, staff, alumni and local community organizations with its annual Social Work Month Awards.

The school paid tribute to 25 individuals and four organizations that demonstrated exceptional accomplishments in social work during the past year in a March 5 ceremony on the Downtown Phoenix campus.

Awardees included the recipient of the school's first-ever Legacy Award: a 90-year-old alumna who earned a Master of Social Work degree in 1965 as part of the degree program's inaugural cohort.

The profession commemorates the contributions of social workers each March, during Social Work Month. The National Association of Social Workers selected "Social Work: Compassion + Action" as the month's 2025 national theme.

Citing U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics figures, the National Association of Social Workers said it expects the social work profession to grow 7% by 2033, faster than the average for all occupations.

"By then, more than 836,000 social workers will be employed here in the United States," the association said in a statement. "Social workers undergo years of schooling and training, gaining the expertise needed to support communities and individuals. They excel at meeting people where

they are and provide compassionate guidance and help.”

The school presented its Legacy Award to Carolyn Mitchell ('65 MSW). The award recognizes alumni whose contributions to the profession have profoundly shaped its landscape and inspired generations. It recognizes “enduring dedication, groundbreaking achievements, and the creation of lasting impact within the social work community,” according to the school.

Career spanned 6 decades

Mitchell, 90, enjoyed a career that spanned six decades. She worked in public welfare and child welfare for the Maricopa County Department of Public Welfare. Afterward, she spent the bulk of her professional service in the rehabilitation units at the former Good Samaritan Hospital and then at Barrow Neurological Institute at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix. At Barrow, she also assisted patients with spinal cord injuries.

Mitchell was the keynote speaker at the awards ceremony, telling of the many stops in her long social work journey and about people she was proud to serve. Also making remarks were professors Wendy Wolfersteig and Jose Ashford, who along with Lily Perez-Freerks, a full administrative professional, are retiring in May 2025.

While attending Phoenix College in the 1950s, Mitchell worked as a messenger and a nursing assistant at the former Good Samaritan Hospital, today called Banner University Medical Center. She met the hospital’s social services director, who interested her in social work.

“I was a capable employee, so I got a lot of special attention,” Mitchell said in an interview before the ceremony. “I got to know the director of social services. I had the opportunity to go to nursing school, but I didn’t quite see myself as a nurse.”

Mitchell transferred to what was then known as Arizona State College in Tempe, earning her Bachelor of Social Work degree in 1957. After graduation, she worked for one year assisting people in need at the Maricopa County Department of Public Welfare.

After working for one year in public assistance, she then supervised the intake of abused and neglected children in the Maricopa County child welfare division. After that, she enrolled in the two-year master’s program at the now ASU School of Social Work when it opened in 1963.

“It was a long-awaited educational experience for people in Arizona who had to go out of state to get a master’s degree in social work,” Mitchell said. “When the school started here, there must have been a fair number of people who applied. Nineteen students graduated in 1965. Fortunately, I was one of those students.”

After receiving her master's degree, she returned to the child welfare division and eventually became a field instructor for graduate students at the county welfare agency.

A few years later, she returned to Good Samaritan, working in the rehabilitation institute with patients, families and staff. She ultimately became co-coordinator of its regional spinal cord injury program. It was the first regional civilian spinal cord injury program in the nation. Mitchell retained her status as a social worker, performing those duties.

Mitchell was at Good Samaritan until 1984, when she left to enter private practice for two years. She later was employed at a for-profit rehabilitation hospital. In 1992 she went to work at Barrow's rehabilitation center, where she remained until her retirement in 2015 at age 81.

Challenges facing today's social workers

Mitchell said today's social workers employed in rehabilitation, as she was, will be challenged by spending and job cuts that will task them to work more efficiently as a team, which she said is an enriching experience.

Over the years, rehabilitation treatment and programs have been refined with skilled staff, physician care and advanced training for nurses and therapists, Mitchell said. She added there is a need for continued refinement of rehabilitation care and advanced training for all members of the rehab team.

"The leader of the team isn't you, but the patient and their family. When you put it all together, you have an effective program," she said. "As I listen to what's going on now about cuts to medical and rehab programs, the people it will affect most are those with catastrophic illnesses and injuries."

Mitchell said that she thinks social workers will be able to effectively deal with such challenges because they are the most resilient professionals she knows.

"I can't think of a profession that would deal with that as well as social workers can," she said. "I know I would try to do anything to get resources for patients and their families."

School Director and Distinguished Professor of Social Policy [Elizabeth Lightfoot](#) said before the ceremony that Mitchell's experiences continue to inspire upcoming generations of social workers.

"Sixty years after earning her MSW, Carolyn Mitchell continues to be recognized for her outstanding career, shaping the field of social work in Arizona with expertise and leadership," Lightfoot said.

A list of the 2025 Social Work Month Awards and their recipients is [available here](#). The School of Social Work is part of the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#).

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Ninety-year-old Carolyn Mitchell ('65 MSW), one of the first-ever recipients of an Arizona State University Master of Social Work degree in 1965, talks about her life and career to students, faculty, staff and alumni at the School of Social Work's 2025 Social Work Month Awards. The March 5 ceremony was held in the W. P. Carey Armstrong Great Hall at the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law on the Downtown Phoenix campus. Photo by Mark J. Scarp/ASU