Newfoundland & Labrador
**College of Social Workers**

# TECHNOLOGY USE
# IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE
# (*Explanatory Document*)

**Adopted February 3, 2012, Revised October 2021**

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*Note:  Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of and adhere to the Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2020) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) and the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice.*

*This explanatory document is a companion document to the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) regulates the practice of social work in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) under provincial legislation titled the Social Workers Act, SNL 2010, c.S-17.2.  The vision is Excellence in Social Work.

Technology use in social work practice continues to expand, and virtual care has become an essential component of service delivery.  The purpose of this document is to:

a) Support social workers in their use of technology in social work practice,

b) Highlight awareness of the practice standards, considerations and ethical responsibilities when using technology in the provision of social work services,

c) Inform social workers, employers, and the public on best practices for technology use in social work practice.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR TECHNOLOGY USE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

1. Technology use in social work practice is grounded in the values, ethics, and principles of the social work profession.

2. Social workers ensure proficiency in the use of technology in the workplace and practice within their competency, while continuing to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

3. As part of the informed consent process, social workers inform clients about technologies that are being used in the delivery of social work services, including the inherent risks and opportunities.

4. Social workers document all electronic communications in keeping with agency/organizational policies, professional standards, and best practice guidelines.

5. Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of inter-jurisdictional issues when providing social work services or virtual care to clients located or residing in a jurisdiction outside of Newfoundland and Labrador.

6. Social workers address issues relating to conflicts of interest, dual and multiple relationships, and boundaries as it pertains to the use of technology in practice.

7. Social workers who use technology to conduct social work research or to gather information/research to inform practice do so in a manner that ensures ethical credibility.

8. Social workers demonstrate respect and professionalism when relating to colleagues, supervisees, and students through electronic mediums and establish appropriate online boundaries.

9. Social workers using technology to advance social justice issues, engage in advocacy efforts, and/or participate in political action, adhere to the values and principles of the social work profession.

## DEFINITIONS

### Social Work

The *Social Workers Act* (2010) of NL defines social work as: the assessment, remediation and prevention of psycho-social problems and the enhancement of the social, psycho-social functioning and well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities by using social work knowledge, theory and skills to

(i)    provide direct counselling and therapy services to a client,

(ii)   develop, implement, manage or deliver human service programs, including those done in collaboration with other professions,

(iii)  contribute to the development and advancement of health and social policy, and,

(iv)  conduct research in the science, technique and practice of social work.

### Social Worker

To refer to oneself as a social worker or to practice within the scope of practice of the social work profession in NL, an individual must meet the criteria for registration as outlined under the *Social Workers Act* (2010) and be actively registered. Registered social workers are granted the RSW designation. Use of the RSW designation affirms an individual has met the criteria for registration and has been granted use of the title and right to practice social work in NL.

### Clients

Clients include a "person, family, group of persons, incorporated body, association or community on whose behalf a social worker provides or agrees to provide a service or to whom the social worker is legally obligated to provide service" (Canadian Association of Social Workers, CASW, 2005a, p. 10). The word, "client," acknowledges the power differential that exists between giver and receiver of service.

### Electronic Social Work Services

Electronic social work services mean the use of computers (including the Internet, social media, online chat, text, and email) and other electronic means (such as smartphones, landline telephones, and video technology) to (a) provide information to the public, (b) deliver social work services to clients, (c) communicate with clients, (d) manage confidential information and case records, (e) store and access information about clients, and (f) arrange payment for professional services. (Association of Social Work Boards, 2015)

## RATIONALE

Increasingly, social workers use technology to provide social work interventions, document client service delivery, communicate with clients, colleagues, and organizations, conduct research on theories, techniques and interventions, and access community resources.  E-therapy, on-line counselling, telehealth, and virtual care is being provided as part of the standard of care in private and organizational practice settings.

Technology use in social work practice does have unique opportunities and challenges.  It is therefore necessary that social workers have the appropriate skills, knowledge, and expertise to incorporate technology into ethical practice.

While organizations have policies in place for technology use in service delivery, this document has been developed to highlight some of the ethical, best practice, and professional issues that need to be considered in social work practice.

For the purpose of this document, technology refers to any mode of electronic communication used in the delivery of social work services.


## BEST PRACTICES FOR TECHNOLOGY USE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE (ELABORATED)

These best practices are informed by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics, the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice, the Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2020) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) (2015) Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA) (2017) Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice, and relevant social work and professional literature.


1.  Technology use in social work practice is grounded in the values, ethics and principles of the social work profession.

    The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) outlines the values and principles that guide professional social work practice.  These values include:
    1)  Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons
    2)  Pursuit of Social Justice
    3)  Service to Humanity
    4)  Integrity in Professional Practice
    5)  Confidentiality in Professional Practice
    6)  Competence in Professional Practice

As technology use in social work practice evolves and expands, it is important that social workers continue to explore how technology impacts on their professional practice including clinical, administrative, community practice, social policy, and education.

Professional practice issues that social workers should continuously be attuned to include competence, client privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, boundaries and dual and multiple relationships, conflicts of interest, documentation, and e-professionalism. A reflection on each of the values outlined in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics is important in resolving ethical conflicts that relate to technology in social work practice.

The best interest of the client is a guiding principle in social work practice. Social workers assess client needs and only provide electronic social work services in the best interest of clients. When necessary, offering clients an alternate form of service delivery or referral to another professional may be appropriate. This is in keeping with the ethical value "Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons".

Social workers "maintain a high level of professional conduct by acting honestly and responsibly, and promoting the values of the profession". Social workers who use electronic technologies maintain a professional online social presence that accurately reflect their knowledge and competence, and upholds the values and principles of the social work profession.

As with in-person service delivery, social workers who provide electronic social work services are responsible for adhering to the ethical values and standards of the profession including the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador, the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice.

2. Social workers ensure proficiency in the use of technology in the workplace and practice within their competency, while continuing to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

   According to the NASW, ASWB, CSWE, CSWA (2017) Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice, "social workers who provide electronic services should be competent in the use of technology and maintain competency through relevant continuing education, consultation, supervision, and training. Social workers should continuously learn about changes in technology used to provide these services" (p.16).

   Generally, organizations and employers have established policies and may provide training and education to guide social workers' use of technologies in practice that are required by the organization (i.e., electronic documentation, videoconferencing, internet-based programs, wireless technologies, etc.). Where this training is lacking or underdeveloped, social workers advocate for educational training and resources.

   Social workers who use electronic mediums in the provision of clinical services and virtual care (i.e., on-line therapy or counselling, on-line support groups) should only do so once they have the necessary knowledge and skills in the technology and the practice. As outlined in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics: "social workers demonstrate due care for client's interests

and safety by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence" (p.8).  It is therefore important that social workers engage in continuing education opportunities to increase their skills, knowledge, and competencies in the use of technology, and seek consultation and supervision.  This is in keeping with Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice, of the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics which states: "social workers strive to maintain and increase their professional knowledge and skill" (p.8).

While technology use in social work practice can enhance service delivery, social workers also  need to be cognizant of the limitations and ethical challenges that technology can bring.  Social workers using technology in practice need to continuously evaluate and assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of technology mediums and only use technologies that are in the best interests of clients and are in keeping with culturally sensitive practice.

Social workers are seeing an increase in the number of clients and client systems who use technology in their personal and professional lives.  It is therefore important that social workers continue to strive to understand the impact of technology on clients, organizations, and communities.  Issues such as cultural considerations, accessibility, and community practices need to be taken into consideration, in addition to clinical issues such as on-line bullying.

Technology is also being used more by supervisors and educators.  Social workers providing supervision to colleagues or students encourage and facilitate discussions on the use of technology in social work practice.  These discussions will assist with evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of the technology being used and raising awareness of the professional and ethical issues that need to be considered.

3.  As part of the informed consent process, social workers inform clients about technologies that are being used in the delivery of social work services, including the inherent risks and opportunities.

Informed consent is defined as a "voluntary agreement reached by a capable client based on information about foreseeable risks and benefits associated with the agreement (e.g., participation in counselling or agreement to disclose social work report to a third party)" (CASW, 2005a, p. 10).

When social workers incorporate the use of technology in their practice, it is important that clients are informed about what technology is being used, the policies that guide the technological use, any benefits and limitations, and how technology failures will be addressed, including backup plans. It should be documented in the client file that these issues were addressed as part of the informed consent process.

Benefits of technology use in the delivery of social work services may include:
- Convenience and enhanced access to services
- Elimination or reduction in travel to attend sessions
- Removal of geographic barriers
- Privacy of sessions and choice of location for the client assessing services

Limitations of technology use in the delivery of social work services may include:
- Technological failures
- Potential breaches of confidentiality
- Client comfort with technology use
- Lack of visual cues when video is not being used

As different modes of technology are used in the delivery of social work services, it is important that social workers clearly identify the identity and location of the client prior to engaging in service delivery. This is to ensure that the client is the intended recipient of services as part of the informed consent process. Social workers also ensure the capacity of the client to consent to services.

In using technology in practice, social workers adhere to privacy and confidentiality best practice standards and relevant legislation including the Personal Health Information Act and the Privacy Act when applicable. Social workers ensure that clients, groups, and organizations are aware of the privacy and confidentiality concerns with the use of technology in practice, and inform policies to address these issues. As outlined in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice: "social workers take precautions to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information transmitted to other parties through the use of computers, electronic mail, facsimile machines, telephone answering machines and other electronic technology. Social workers inform clients of the limits to confidentiality that may apply to these forms of communication" (p. 7). In addition to informing clients of the limits to confidentiality, social workers incorporate risk management strategies and inform clients of precautions that are being taken to minimize potential breaches such as encrypted e-mails, firewalls, and passwords.

As in all social worker/client relationships, it is important that clients are aware of how, and when, social work services delivered through technology will be terminated. This is particularly important for social workers who receive e-mails and/or texts from clients during the relationship to ensure that clear boundaries are maintained throughout the duration of the relationship and after the social work intervention ends.

4. Social workers document all electronic communications in keeping with agency/ organizational policies, ethical standards, and best practice guidelines.

Documentation is an essential component of social work practice. The primary purpose of social work documentation is to "provide a clear statement of social work assessment, intervention, and decision-making" (NLCSW, 2020, p. 5). Social work documentation also provides:
- Professional accountability and transparency to the client and organization and in keeping with relevant legislation.
- Opportunity for critical thought and reflection on professional practice and service delivery.
- Relevant information to facilitate service delivery, continuity of care and termination of services.

- Information for the purposes of supervision.
- Documentation for the purposes of research and program evaluation.
- Information for risk management and quality assurance.
- A record to facilitate inter-disciplinary communication and collaboration.

As with all social work documentation, social workers adhere to agency/organizational policies, ethical standards, and best practice guidelines where client information is gathered via electronic communication.

The following are some areas that social workers need to be aware of when it comes to documentation and electronic communication.

- Informed consent and transparency: When electronic modes of communication are used in the delivery of social work services or to connect with clients, it is important that social workers have policies pertaining to the documentation of electronic communications and discuss this with clients as part of the informed consent process. Clients should have a clear understanding of how information is being recorded and who has access to the information; allowing them to make decisions about what information is communicated electronically.

- Documentation of e-mail, phone, text, or other electronic messages from clients: "Social work records should contain all information that is clinically relevant and significant to the service delivery" (NLCSW, 2020, p.6). Social workers must use clinical judgment in assessing whether information received through electronic communication has clinical significance and to record all necessary and relevant information. Social workers should also have clear policies pertaining to response times to electronic messages that is documented as part of the informed consent process.

- Crisis Situations: When communicating with clients electronically, it is important that social workers have clear policies on how crisis situations will be handled, and for clients to be informed about these policies through the informed consent process. This should be revisited, as necessary, throughout the relationship. Social workers should clarify with clients the type of information that is appropriate for electronic communication, particularly when it is outside of scheduled contact or planned sessions, and how and when these communications will be addressed in keeping with agency policies and practice standards. This information should be clearly documented in the client file. Ensuring that clients have information pertaining to local emergency services, supports and resources is also recommended.

- Client access to records: "Social workers provide clients with information on how they can access their social work records that is in keeping with policy and legislation" (NLCSW, 2020, p. 6). When documenting electronically, social workers must consider how to give clients access to their records, in keeping with client confidentiality standards, when requested. Clients should also be provided with

information on how long records will be maintained and stored, in keeping with professional and organizational standards, following the termination of the professional relationship.

- Confidentiality of client record: As outlined in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice: "social workers protect the confidentiality of clients' written and electronic records. Social workers take reasonable steps to ensure that clients' records are stored in a secure location and that clients' records are not available to others who are not authorized to have access" (p. 8). When using electronic forms of documentation or information collection (i.e., laptops), it is important that social workers develop risk management strategies (i.e., computer passwords, back-up files).

5. Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of inter-jurisdictional issues when providing social work services or virtual care to clients located or residing in a jurisdiction outside of Newfoundland and Labrador.

When providing electronic social work services across jurisdictions, it is the responsibility of the social worker to connect with the relevant social work regulatory body where the client is residing or located, clearly explain how they will be providing social work services within that jurisdiction, and ask about the necessary registration requirements. Prior to engaging in interjurisdictional service delivery, social workers must ensure they are following the regulatory requirements where the client is located or residing and the jurisdiction where the social worker resides.

Social workers providing services to a client in another jurisdiction, must also be aware of and comply with legislation and reporting requirements (i.e., reporting child protection concerns, adult protection concerns, age of consent) in that jurisdiction.

It is also important that social workers engaged in interjurisdictional practice have the appropriate professional liability insurance.

6. Social workers address issues relating to conflicts of interest, dual and multiple relationships, and boundaries as it pertains to the use of technology in practice.

The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and social work literature speak to the importance of social workers setting appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries with clients and former clients. While the introduction of technology can sometimes challenge these boundaries, it is the responsibility of the social worker to establish and maintain boundaries that are in the best interest of the client and avoid real, perceived or potential conflicts of interest.

Online social networking has grown significantly, and millions of people world-wide are connecting through electronic mediums. Professional social media sites (e.g., LinkedIn) are also increasingly used by professionals, including social workers. It is therefore important that social workers are aware of the ethical considerations pertaining to the use of social

media and the interplay between professional and personal boundaries.  The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics outlines several ethical considerations, specifically as it relates to Values 4 and 5, that need to be considered within the context of social media use.

*Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice* speaks to the issue of professional boundaries, dual and multiple relationships, and conflicts of interest in social work practice.

It is the responsibility of social workers to establish appropriate boundaries with clients/former clients and to be open and transparent about real or potential conflicts of interest.  As noted in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice "social workers avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgement" (p.11).  These ethical considerations need to be explored in situations that arise in practice that pertain to social media (i.e., responding to a client/former client/student friend request or message on a social media platform, navigating shared connections on social media, etc.).  It is important to note that accepting online friend requests from clients on one's personal social networking site does create boundary challenges and should be avoided.

Within the context of boundaries, practitioner self-disclosure is another area that warrants consideration.  Social workers need to be cognizant of what personal information can be accessed about them on-line, how this disclosure will impact their professional role and professional relationships with clients, and use risk management strategies to prevent clients from accessing their personal information on social media sites (i.e., high privacy settings).  As noted in the ASWB (2015) Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice, social workers "Take reasonable steps to prevent client access to social workers' personal social networking sites to avoid boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships.  Social workers shall maintain separate professional and personal social media and websites in order to establish clear boundaries and to avoid inappropriate dual relationships" (p. 7) and "Avoid posting personal information on professional websites, blogs or other forms of social media that might create boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships" (p. 8).

Social workers also need to be aware of social connections on social media sites.  Social workers may belong to the same online groups or have shared social media contacts.  This raises important boundary considerations that social workers may have to navigate.  It is important that social workers "be aware that shared membership in cultural groups based on race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, religion, addiction recovery, and other personal interests may create boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships. Social workers shall avoid conflicts of interest and inappropriate dual relationships based on their personal interests and online presence" (ASWB, 2015, p.8).

Social workers who are engaged in social media should also inform clients about their, or their employers, social media policy at the beginning of the social worker-client relationship and throughout the duration of the relationship as needed through the informed consent process.  This is a helpful strategy for mitigating potential boundary challenges.  Where social

media policies are lacking, social workers consider developing one or advocate for the development of one that is based on the ethics and standards of the social work profession.

*Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice* highlights the importance of a client's right to confidentiality. Confidential information is only disclosed with the informed consent of the client or when required by law or court order.

The following excerpt from the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice is important when exploring the issue of client confidentiality within the context of social media.

> Social workers respect client's right to privacy. Social workers do not solicit private information from clients unless it is required to provide services or to conduct social work research. Once information is shared or observed in the professional context, standards of confidentiality apply. Social workers protect clients' identity and only disclose confidential information to other parties (including family members) with the informed consent of clients or the clients legally authorized representatives, or when required by law or court order. This obligation continues indefinitely after the social worker has ceased contact with the client (p. 6).

While client information may be readily available on social networking platforms or through electronic searches, social workers respect client privacy and only access client information through electronic technologies with the informed consent of clients. In emergency situations, where no other options exist for accessing information that is necessary to mitigate harm to the client or others, an exception may be justified. As noted in the ASWB (2015) mode regulatory standards, social workers "Obtain client consent when using electronic search engines to gather information about the client, with the exception of emergency circumstances when such search may provide information to help protect the client or other parties who may be at risk" (p. 7). Client information that is accessed online, including the rationale for the search, should be clearly documented in the client file. Where social workers naturally come across client information online (i.e., through shared online contacts) this should be disclosed to the client to avoid issues of bias or misunderstandings. Social workers may also want to discuss with clients steps they can take to protect their privacy online.

When using personal or professional social networking platforms, social workers should not post or share client information. Importantly, Kolmes (2009) notes that even if client information is posted without disclosing a person's name, age, or ethnicity, given the nature of the public forum, this may not be enough to protect privacy and confidentiality.

The use of online client testimonials as it relates to client confidentiality also warrants consideration and caution. Social workers must use professional judgement, consider the ethical issues and ways to mitigate risk, examine boundary issues, ensure that the best interest of the client principle is upheld, and only post client testimonials with the informed consent of clients or former clients.

7. Social workers who use technology to conduct social work research or to gather information/research to inform practice do so in a manner that ensures ethical credibility. Research conducted through electronic mediums shall adhere to the values and ethics of the social work profession. The CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice outlines the ethical responsibilities of social workers engaged in research, including:

> 6.1.1 Social workers educate themselves, their students and their colleagues about responsible research practices.

> 6.3 Social workers obtain informed consent to take part in research from either participants or their legally authorized representatives.

> 6.3.2 Social workers ensure confidentiality of research participants' identity and discuss them only in limited circumstances for professional purposes.

> 6.3.4 Social workers store research material securely and for the required period as indicated by relevant research ethics guidelines.

Social workers practice diligently when accessing internet-based resources or published research to support service delivery. It is important that when internet-based resources are researched, social workers validate the credibility of the resource before incorporating it into practice or referring clients to the internet site.

The NASW/ASWB/CSWE/CSWA (2017) outlines actions social workers can take when considering research from on-line resources which includes "taking reasonable steps to assess authorship and sponsorship; the credentials and competencies of the researchers; the reliability, validity, currency, and limitations of the research; and the accuracy of the reported findings or results" (p. 29).

8. Social workers demonstrate respect and professionalism when relating to colleagues, supervisees, and students through electronic mediums and establish appropriate online boundaries.

Social workers engaged in online work or communications with colleagues, supervisees and students abide by the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice and NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice.

The following are important guidelines/standards for consideration:

> "Social workers relate to both social work colleagues and colleagues from other disciplines with respect, integrity, and courtesy…." (CASW, 2005b, p. 13).

> "Social workers do not engage in any dual or multiple relationships with supervisees when there is a risk of exploitation of, or potential harm to the supervisee" (CASW, 2005b, p. 15).

> "Social workers do not engage in any dual or multiple relationships with students in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the student. Social work educators and field instructors are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries' (CASW, 2005b, p. 16).

9. Social workers using technology to advance social justice issues, engage in advocacy efforts, and/or participate in political action, adhere to the values and principles of the social work profession.

   The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics speaks to the professional value of social justice (Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice). As a profession, social workers have an ethical responsibility to promote social justice and advocate for policies, programs, and resources to meet the health and well-being of all individuals. Social workers embrace and promote the principles of fairness, inclusion, respect, equality, and equity. When social workers use technology to advance social justice issues, a reflection on the values and principles of the profession as outlined in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics is important. Social workers give due attention to issues pertaining professional integrity and client confidentiality. As noted in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice "Social workers demonstrate respect, honesty, integrity and professionalism in their advocacy efforts to promote social justice" (p. 16) and "Social workers ensure that the standard pertaining to client confidentiality is upheld when engaging in advocacy" (p. 17).

   Information that is posted on social networking sites is public and can be accessed and shared beyond the intended audience. Further, as noted by the NASW, ASWB, CSWE and CSWA (2017) "Postings and other electronic messages may be misinterpreted, misrepresented, or taken out of context" (p. 29). Therefore, when highlighting, sharing, promoting, or responding to social justice issues on social networking sites, social workers ensure they are adhering to ethical and practice standards; use caution and consider the impact of the opinions being shared; are aware of cultural sensitivities; consider who has access to the information, and how the information or content of a post may be perceived, including the impact on individuals, organizations, and members of the profession; and address misunderstandings in a proactive manner.

## CONCLUSION

This document highlights best practices for technology use in social work practice in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended to provide guidance and support to social workers in diverse fields of practice and to raise awareness of the practice considerations and ethical responsibilities of using technology in practice. The ultimate goal is excellence in social work practice.

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