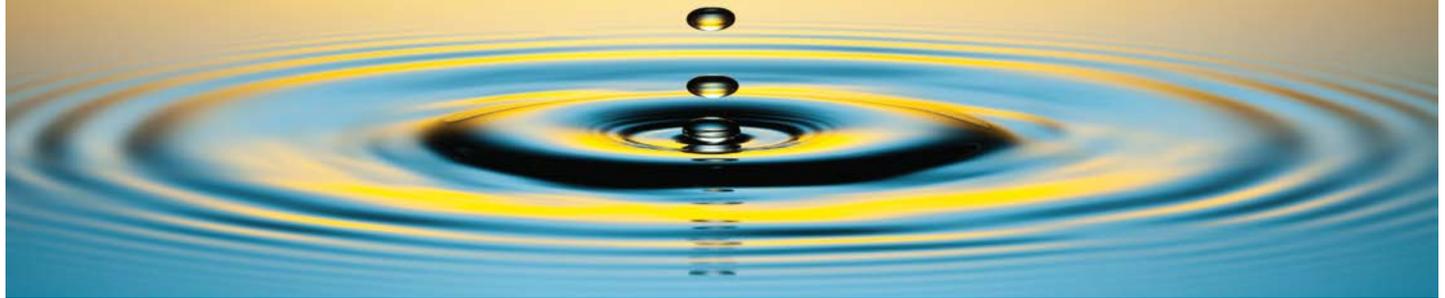


Newfoundland & Labrador Association of

**Social Workers**

Practice Matters



***Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.***

## **Social Work Documentation**

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Documentation is an essential component of good social work practice. Yet, when competing demands arise, documentation receives a lower priority. This edition of Practice Matters will explore considerations for effectively integrating documentation into social work practice ensuring the highest quality of professional intervention.

### **Why document?**

The Social Work Dictionary (2014) defines recording as “the process of putting in writing and keeping on file relevant information about the client, the problem, the prognosis, the intervention plan, the progress of treatment, the social, economic and health factors that contribute to the situation and the procedures for termination or referral”.

The latest *NLASW Standards for Social Work Recording* was launched in December 2014. The document identifies eight standards for social work recording which include the obligation to maintain records of intervention in a form which facilitates monitoring and includes a clear assessment, intervention and treatment plan.

Maintaining a record of professional interventions and opinions which is impartial, accurate and includes essential and relevant details related to the service being provided is included in the *CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005) under Section 1.0 Ethical Responsibilities to Clients.

The process of preparing documentation focuses the assessment and understanding of the client's goals. It provides the starting point with the client for subsequent intervention and serves as a method of evaluation for the intervention. Documentation is a key to ensure that practice decisions are well considered. Good documentation establishes accountability and evidence of the services provided.

The social work record, which provides accurate and appropriate information about the client's situation, is invaluable at the time of intervention and for years into the future. It is also necessary for continuity of care within a team, an organization or at times of anticipated or unanticipated absences of the social worker.

The *NLASW Standards for Social Work Recording* provides the foundation upon which all social work records whether written or electronic are to be produced. Social work is a diverse profession meaning that the specifics of the record will be determined by the area of practice and the nature of the intervention. Whether a social worker is providing family therapy in a mental health clinic, conducting risk assessments in child protection or engaging in employment based counselling, the *NLASW Standards for Social Work Recording* apply.

## **Barriers**

While social workers are very aware of the importance of documentation, systemic and individual barriers have been identified. Identifying and addressing these barriers are significant steps towards ensuring high quality professional documentation.

### *Systemic- Professional Practice Environments*

The professional practice environment is identified as the factors which influence quality care. When time restraints are present, recording is given a lower priority (Kagle, 1993, Gelman 1992, Streat 1987 in Regehr & Kanani 2006). Systemic barriers to effective documentation include high caseloads, competing demands, challenging work environments, lack of clear policy related to documentation and limited access to supervision and consultation. When systemic barriers are identified professional social workers and organizations work together to achieve the following:

- Developing policy which works for the client record and the professionals providing service.
  - Social workers avail of opportunities to provide input regarding the system of recording.
  - Organizations provide opportunities for social workers to give this input
- Offering and availing of training on topics such as writing and agency expectations
- Using documentation audits as educational opportunities.

- Recognizing the challenges of workload and developing strategies to address these challenges
- Using forums such as professional practice councils, staff and team meetings to discuss documentation
- Ensuring access to supervision in accordance with the *NLASW Standards for Supervision of Social Work Practice*.

Self-employed social workers in private practice are the custodians of the personal health information of clients. Therefore, it is important that private practitioners develop policy for their social work records which are in compliance with the Personal Health Information Act for Newfoundland and Labrador. Further information for private practitioners is available in the *NLASW Resource Guide for Private Practice (2014)*.

### *Individual*

Recording is rarely a task approached with enthusiasm by social workers (Tebb, 1991, in Regehr et al 2006). In addition to recognizing and addressing systemic barriers, social workers also reflect on their own professional practice of documentation.

Current legislation in Canada permitting individuals greater access to their records has resulted in the need to be concise, accurate and to ensure opinions are well substantiated with facts (Regehr et al 2006). Individual social workers may question what to put into the record thus taking more time to complete documentation.

The approach to documentation has changed throughout the years with a shift from analysis to action, being less subjective and requiring clear professional opinions. There has also been an increase in the use of electronic records. When documenting, social workers use professional judgment on what should be recorded about the specific circumstances of the client/family and select wording which is clear and objective. Good writing skills are essential.

Social workers consider:

- Being aware of all organizational policies pertaining to documentation
- Seeking clarity respecting expectations for the content of the record within the specific field of practice as required
- Engaging in continuing education which focuses on the mechanics of writing
- Ensuring a comfort level with electronic mediums and understanding technology.
- Being familiar with the *NLASW Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice (2012)*
- Being familiar with the *NLASW Standards for Social Work Recording*

- Discussing documentation with supervisors, peers and Professional Practice Councils
- Participating in peer audits

To assist social workers to reflect on documentation in professional practice, the NLASW Documentation Self-Reflection tool poses the following questions:

- How do I view documentation in my practice?
- What do I see as the primary purpose for social work documentation? Does this have an impact on how I document?
- How familiar am I with the professional standards for documentation?
- How would I describe the link between assessment and documentation?
- How do I make decisions on what to include in my documentation?
- What are my documentation strengths?
- How would I describe my writing skills?
- What areas do I need to improve on in my documentation? How can I further my skills and competencies in documentation?
- What gets in the way of my documentation and recording? What strategies might be helpful in addressing these barriers?

## **Conclusion:**

Social work documentation is essential for the client, the social worker and the organizations within which services are provided. This edition of Practice Matters affirms the place of documentation within social work practice and provides considerations for individual social workers and organizations to ensure the highest quality of services are provided to clients.

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