

Ethical Compass



Ethical Compass is an initiative of the NLCSW Ethics Committee and is intended as a resource for members. The issues covered in this publication have been identified by social workers as part of the NLCSW ethical consultation process and from a review of ethical trends in practice.

Virtual Care – Key Considerations

The delivery of social work services through technology use continues to expand and virtual care is likely here to stay. While there are many benefits to virtual care, it is important that social workers consider this mode of service delivery within the context of the ethics and standards of the social work profession, as they would with all forms of social work intervention. It is through a reflection on the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics and the Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2020) Standards of Practice that social workers will continue to offer the highest quality professional services to the public. This edition of Ethical Compass explores some of the issues social workers should consider when providing virtual care.

Best Interest of the Client: The best interest of the client is a guiding principle in social work practice. Social work interventions are provided in a manner that keeps the client's interests paramount, and social workers use professional judgement in assessing whether virtual care is appropriate in meeting the needs of a client. Whether social workers are providing virtual care, in-person intervention and support, or a blend of both, it is important to engage clients in a discussion on how they would like to avail of services. If a client prefers a mode of service delivery not offered by the social worker (i.e., a client wants to avail of virtual services, but the social worker is not providing this), a referral to another professional in the client's best interest may be necessary.

Competence: "Social workers seek proficiency in the use of technology in the workplace and practice within their competency, while continuing to enhance their knowledge, skills and abilities" (NLCSW, 2020, p. 9). To ensure competence to provide virtual care, social workers seek skill development in the technological platform being used and access appropriate consultation and supervision. There are many technological platforms available, and organizations may have preferred programs that are being used. For social workers in private practice, finding the right platform will involve research into the various technologies available and choosing one that works best for them and their clientele, while also meeting the standards of practice pertaining to technology use, informed consent, and client confidentiality.

Informed Consent & Transparency: When providing electronic social work services, it is important to engage clients in a conversation about the benefits and limitations of virtual care through the informed consent process. Having this documented in the client file is recommended. Some of the benefits to virtual care from a client perspective can include enhanced and convenient access to services, and elimination of the time required for travel to and from sessions. Many clients also find it a more confidential and private way to access services. Limitations may include lack of visual cues, (particularly when video is not being used), confidentiality breaches (i.e., client file is accessed by a third party, family member of the client overhears the therapy session), and technological failures (i.e., computer freezes up, lost internet connections, phone call drops, etc.). Technological failures can happen prior to a scheduled session or in the middle of a session. Therefore, social workers need to be thinking about how to address these issues in a proactive manner. As with in-person service delivery, social workers should also consider how emergency situations will be addressed. By engaging clients in a fulsome discussion about virtual care, social workers and clients can determine if virtual care is the best option, which is necessary for it to work successfully.

Client Confidentiality: No one platform or electronic program is 100% private and secure. It is therefore important that social workers take reasonable steps to ensure client confidentiality and privacy (i.e., use of encrypted emails, login passwords, and computer firewalls). Informing clients about the steps taken, and educating clients on steps they can also take (i.e., password protecting their electronic device, selecting a private setting to attend sessions) is important.

Interjurisdictional Practice: The provision of virtual care diminishes geographical barriers and increases access to services. However, social workers with clients in jurisdictions outside of Newfoundland and Labrador also have a responsibility to be aware of, and adhere to, the regulatory/registration requirements in the jurisdiction where the client is located or residing. To assist social workers in navigating interjurisdictional practice, NLCSW developed an [Interjurisdictional Social Work Practice FAQ and Practice Guidance document](#).

This edition of Ethical Compass explored some of the considerations social workers must be attuned to when providing virtual care. As technology is integrated into social work practice, it is important to recognize that while the medium in which services are delivered has changed, the same ethical and practice standards apply. It is important to engage in consultation with colleagues/managers/supervisors and continuing professional education that will increase one's knowledge, skills, and abilities in effectively providing virtual social work services. A review of the CASW Code of Ethics/Guidelines for Ethical Practice, the NLCSW Standards of Practice and resources developed by the NLCSW pertaining to electronic practice is also important and in keeping with professional practice. These and other important documents can be assessed at www.nlcsw.ca.

References:

CASW. (2005). *Code of ethics*. https://www.casw-acts.ca/files/documents/casw_code_of_ethics.pdf

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