

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.

Continuity of Care – Practice Considerations

Social workers are committed to providing high quality professional services and ensuring continuity of care. Social workers seek to ensure that clients have access to needed services, address factors impeding service delivery, and deal with interruptions to services as necessary. This edition of Ethical Compass explores the concept of continuity of care and highlights areas for consideration to maintain the best interest of clients.

Priority of Clients' Interests: "Social workers maintain the best interests of clients as a priority..." (CASW, 2005b, p. 3). This is an overarching principle that guides social work practice and decisions pertaining to service delivery.

Competence: "Social workers respect a client's right to competent social work services" (CASW, 2005a, p. 8). In providing continuity of care, social workers ensure they have the appropriate knowledge and skills to meet the needs of clients and can recognize when required interventions fall outside their area of expertise.

Informed Consent: Informed consent is integral to the social worker-client relationship. Social workers engage clients in collaborative dialogue on how they can meet their needs and any limitations that exist. It is important that clients have information on the social work intervention/service, including risks and benefits; general duration; termination; alternative service options; and documentation. In order for services to effectively continue, the informed consent and engagement of clients is fundamental.

Termination & Referral: The termination of a social worker-client relationship may be one that is well planned (e.g., when services are no longer required) or abrupt (e.g., unanticipated leave from work). It is important that clients receive information through the informed consent process on how terminations are typically addressed. This could include information about available resources in the event of the social worker's unplanned absence. Social workers also consider the best interest of the client and refer them to other professionals, with their informed consent, when necessary to ensure the client receives the most appropriate services. This is in keeping with the [NLCSW \(2020\) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador](#).

Documentation: As noted in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice, “The primary purpose of social work recording is to provide a clear statement of social work assessment, intervention, and professional decision-making” (p. 5). To ensure continuity of care, social work records should be up to date, contain all relevant information related to service delivery, and demonstrate one’s professional decision-making. There should be no ambiguity about the services that the client has received and any appropriate next steps. Documentation of the termination of the social worker-client relationship and/or referral to another professional is also important.

Technology Use: Social workers are increasingly using technology in service delivery, either exclusively or in combination with in-person sessions. Important issues relating to technology use and continuity of care include:

- Interjurisdictional practice – social workers providing electronic services across jurisdictions must be aware of and adhere to the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice pertaining to interjurisdictional practice, and the necessary regulatory/registration requirements in the jurisdiction where the client is residing or located. The NLCSW produced [Interjurisdictional Social Work Practice FAQ & Practice Guidance for Social Workers in NL](#) that addresses frequently asked questions pertaining to interjurisdictional practice.
- Technological failures – there may be times that services are interrupted (e.g., internet service is down, phone line becomes disconnected, webinar platform freezes). In those instances, as outlined in NLCSW’s [Technology Use in Social Work Practice Explanatory Document](#), it is important that social workers have a back up plan for dealing with these technology challenges and that the client is aware of next steps. This information should be documented in the client file.

This edition of Ethical Compass highlighted ethical considerations pertaining to continuity of care. It is important that social workers consider issues pertaining to the best interest of clients, competence, informed consent, terminations, referrals, documentation, and interjurisdictional practice, to ensure that clients continue to receive the most appropriate and timely services. The NLCSW has a wealth of practice resources specific to these ethical responsibilities that can be accessed on the NLCSW website at www.nlcsw.ca.

References:

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