

# 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.

## Pro-Bono Work in Social Work Practice

Social work practice in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) is guided by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice and the Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2020) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL. Social work services are generally provided as part of the health and social public system or on a fee for service model in private practice. This edition of Ethical Compass will explore one's professional responsibilities when providing social work services on a pro-bono basis.

**Practice Scenarios:** 1). Jane RSW offers free counselling services to volunteer members of the local search and rescue department. 2). Mary RSW provides free consultation services for a community organization developing a counselling program. 3). Kate RSW runs a free support group for women impacted by intimate partner violence.

### What does Pro-Bono Mean?

Pro-Bono means the provision of professional services without an attached fee. Individuals receiving services understand they are receiving services from a regulated and qualified professional as set out in the contract or through the informed consent process.

### Ethical Considerations

When acting in a professional capacity as a registered social worker, whether it is a paid or unpaid position, the standards of the profession apply. This includes standards pertaining to informed consent, competence, client confidentiality, documentation, terminations, conflicts of interest, the management of dual and multiple relationships, and responsible fee practices.

### Reflection Questions:

1. Do I have the knowledge, skills, and competency to provide the service?
2. Am I able to provide this service in a safe and confidential setting?
3. How will I document the service and interventions provided?
4. Where will my social work records be stored?
5. Do I have the appropriate professional liability insurance?

6. How will terminations be addressed?
7. Could this create a conflict of interest with my paid employment?
8. How might this be perceived by current/future clients?
9. How might this be viewed by my colleagues?

In reflecting on these practice scenarios and questions, a review of the code and standards of practice is important. Importantly, the following apply:

- Social workers maintain the best interests of clients as a priority (CASW Ethical Guidelines, p. 3).
- Social workers place the needs of others above self-interest when acting in a professional capacity (CASW Code, p. 6).
- Social workers demonstrate adherence to the values and ethical principles of the profession... (CASW Code, p. 7).
- Social workers respect the importance of the trust and confidence placed in the professional relationship by clients and members of the public (CASW Code, p. 7).
- Social workers seek to ensure they have the necessary skills to carry out their work efficiently and effectively (NLCSW Standards, p. 4).
- Social workers provide clients with information pertaining to their education and area of expertise and competence (NLCSW Standards, p. 4).
- Social workers seek informed consent from clients prior to the delivery of social work services and throughout the duration of the social worker-client relationship as necessary (NLCSW Standards, p.5).
- Social workers maintain timely, accurate and legible records of social work intervention(s) for each client (NLCSW Standards, p. 5).
- Social workers establish and maintain appropriate professional boundaries with the client's interest being paramount (NLCSW Standards, p. 11).
- Social workers ensure clients are aware of their fee structure prior to the delivery of social work services (NLCSW Standards, p. 15).
- Social workers may charge differential fees for services when such a difference in fee is for the benefit of the client and the fee is not discriminatory (CASW Guidelines, p. 19).
- Social workers demonstrate and promote the qualities of honesty, reliability, impartiality and diligence in their professional practice (CASW Code, p. 7)

When providing pro-bono social work services, it is important clients have clear and sufficient information on one's policy regarding pro-bono service delivery. Consultation with a colleague is also recommended to ensure that one's decision-making on the provision of pro-bono social work services is grounded within an ethical framework and the commitment to the provision of competent, ethical, and high-quality social work services is upheld.

## References:

- CASW. (2005a). *Code of ethics*. [https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/CASW\\_Code\\_of\\_Ethics\\_2005.pdf](https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/CASW_Code_of_Ethics_2005.pdf)
- CASW. (2005b). *Guidelines for ethical practice*. [https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/CASW\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Ethical\\_Practice\\_2005.pdf](https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/CASW_Guidelines_for_Ethical_Practice_2005.pdf)
- NLCSW. (2020). *Standards of practice for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador*. [https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Standards\\_of\\_Practice\\_for\\_Social\\_Workers\\_in\\_NL.pdf](https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Standards_of_Practice_for_Social_Workers_in_NL.pdf)