

Pandemic Preparedness: Reflecting on Competency When Changing Area of Practice or Reentering Social Work Practice

The situation with COVID-19 continues to evolve and as front-line professionals, social workers are providing critical and essential care. Social workers continue to work in health care, child protection, long term care, community supports, corrections, and within community organizations to ensure continuity of care and the delivery of essential services to support the health and social well-being of individuals and families. While work is being delivered through virtual care where possible, there are urgent and essential in-person services being provided.

During times when social workers are not able to report to work due to illness, self-isolation or family and child-care responsibilities as a result of the pandemic, organizations may begin to fill those positions temporarily to address gaps in services. As this happens, social workers may be deployed to another area of practice within their organization, and non-practicing and retired social workers may be called upon to register and assist during the pandemic. While the social work profession is known for its diversity, it is still important for all social workers to take a step back and reflect on their competency to engage in the work. The purpose of this document is to highlight areas for consideration based on the Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador and the CASW Code of Ethics.

CASW (2005) Code of Ethics

As noted in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics “Social workers uphold the rights of clients to be offered the highest quality service possible” and “demonstrate due care for the client’s interest and safety by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence” (p. 8).

Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador

As noted in the Standards of Practice “Social workers ensure they have the necessary skills to carry out their work efficiently and effectively. These skills include, but are not limited to, communication, assessment, interviewing, and documentation” (p. 4).

Social workers changing an area of practice or re-entering the profession are encouraged to reflect on the ethical values and standards pertaining to competency and review the Practice Matters publication titled “The Ethics of Competence”.

As noted in this Practice Matters publication “Social workers who meet the criteria for registration have the competencies to practice in a wide range of settings engaging in a variety of practice modalities.”

The following reflective questions are also important:

- Do I have any previous experience practicing in the field where I am planning to work?
- What skills and expertise do I have that are transferrable to this position?
- Will I have access to appropriate supervision and consultation?
- What type of orientation will I receive?
- Am I confident that I can provide safe and effective services?
- How will I address gaps in my knowledge and learning?
- If virtual care is being offered, is this method of service delivery new to me? What technology standards apply?
- What legislation is guiding the delivery of services?

Social workers must reflect on the additional competencies that are required to complete the tasks and work they are being asked to do and seek ways to ensure they can deliver competent social work services.

Social workers who are currently working but are being deployed to another program may also want to discuss with their managers/supervisors about the areas of practice where they feel more confident working or may have had previous experience. This will also help with the transition.

Social workers will rise to the challenge to ensure that clients continue to receive essential and critical services during this pandemic and that these services are provided competently and in the best interests of clients.