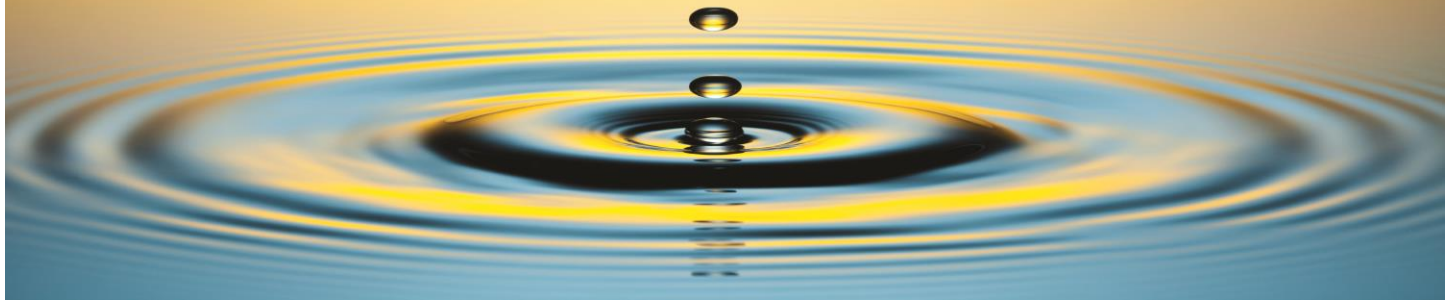


Newfoundland & Labrador Association of

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 Justice Through an Ethical Framework.

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The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) 2005 Code of Ethics outlines the values and principles that guide social work practice. The pursuit of social justice is one of the key values that social workers in all areas of practice uphold in their work. For many, it was the desire to promote a fair and just society that brought us into the profession. This edition of Practice Matters will explore social justice within an ethical framework and highlight some of the ethical dilemmas that social workers may experience in their work.

Social Justice and Ethics

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) highlights the following core ethical principles in the pursuit of social justice:

- Social workers uphold the right of people to have access to resources to meet basic needs.
- Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits.
- Social workers advocate for equal treatment and protection under the law and challenge injustices that affect the vulnerable and disadvantaged.
- Social workers promote social development and environmental management in the interests of all people.

Advocacy, as a tool for social justice, is defined as the “championing of the rights of individuals or communities through direct intervention or through empowerment” (Barker, 2003, p. 10). Social workers engage in advocacy to ensure that individuals, groups, families and communities have access to the necessary services and supports they need to enhance health and well-being.

Every day there are concrete examples of social workers engaging in social justice activities including:

- 1) Volunteering and/or connecting with community coalitions and groups.
- 2) Informing organizational policies and intervention services.
- 3) Engaging in social and/or political action.
- 4) Mobilizing resources and charitable donations.
- 5) Raising public awareness to social injustices.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues may arise when social workers are engaged in social justice activities. These ethical issues can include challenges to boundaries, creation of perceived or actual conflicts of interest, concerns regarding client privacy and confidentiality, and perceptions of unprofessionalism. Consider the following case scenarios.

Scenario 1

Jill RSW is committed to social justice and promotes community involvement in leadership initiatives. For many years, Jill has supported a provincial political party whose ideology aligns with her values of social justice. As a provincial election is looming, Jill reaches out to the party to volunteer her services in the election campaign. Jill works with a drop in mental health counselling service, and recently decided to put up promotional posters in the office for the candidate in her district and has been quite vocal for her support of the party with her colleagues. A client asks her about her political ideations and Jill begins to question whether she should have these flyers up in her office. She decides to consult with a colleague.

Social workers, as community members, have the right to their personal political values and ideations. The right to vote and support political candidates has been afforded to us in a democratic society. However, this scenario raises some ethical considerations as the personal and the professional blend within the context of the social worker-client relationship.

As part of the consultation, Jill and her colleague reviewed the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics. The values of Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons, Service to Humanity, and Integrity in Professional Practice were of key importance.

Value 1: Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

- Social workers uphold each person's right to self-determination

Value 3: Service to Humanity

- Social workers place the needs of others above self-interest when acting in a professional capacity

Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice

- Social workers establish appropriate boundaries in relationships with clients and ensure that the relationship serves the needs of clients.
- Social workers value openness and transparency in professional practice and avoid relationships where their integrity or impartiality may be compromised, ensuring that should a conflict of interest be unavoidable, the nature of the conflict is fully disclosed.

They also considered the following questions:

- a) Does portraying this information in the office create a blend between the social workers personal and professional life?
- b) Was the display of this information for clients to see intentional or unintentional?
- c) Whose needs are being met? Is Jill hoping she can round up votes for her candidate?
- d) What might be the impact on the client or the professional relationship? Positive or negative?
- e) Is this level of self-disclosure appropriate in the therapeutic setting?
- f) How might the social worker's colleagues and employer view this?

After reflecting on these questions, Jill decided that there was some blending between her personal and professional values and that she would take steps to keep her political interests separate from her practice. She removed the flyers from the office and continues to be actively involved in the campaign.

Scenario 2

Kristen RSW works in community supports, and closely followed the passing of legislation on Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). Kristen is personally opposed to MAiD and has been quite vocal on her values and beliefs with colleagues and friends. She recently joined an online group against MAiD, and posted a message on the group's Facebook page outlining her opposition to MAiD and how she felt that vulnerable people were being put at risk. Kristen believes that as a social worker she should raise these issues in a public forum.

While Kristen has the right to her own personal values and opinions, this case scenario raises some interesting ethical considerations related to boundaries and professionalism. Kristen works in an area of practice where end of life issues are often discussed. This presents a potential challenge for Kristen given that her personal values and opinions conflict with the current law.

The following ethical values from the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) would be important for Kristen to consider:

Value 1: Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

- Social workers uphold each person's right to self-determination, consistent with that person's capacity and with the rights of others.
- Social workers respect the client's right to make choices based on voluntary, informed consent.

Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice

- Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits.

Value 3: Service to Humanity

- Social workers place the needs of others above self-interest when acting in a professional capacity.

Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice

- Social workers strive for impartiality in their professional practice, and refrain from imposing their personal values, views and preferences on clients.

NLASW produced a guideline document for social workers and their role in MAiD. One of the areas explored in this document is *Freedom of Conscience & Religion*. While individuals have a legal right to seek medical assistance in dying, professionals are not compelled under the legislation to provide

or assist in MAiD when they are personally and or/morally opposed to MAiD. However, as a profession we do respect the rights of clients to make decisions based on voluntary, informed consent. Therefore, it would be important for Kristen to reflect on whether her personal values and beliefs would impact on her relationship with clients seeking information on MAiD, and to give some consideration to how she would respond to these clients. As noted in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005), "Social workers strive for impartiality in their professional practice and refrain from imposing their values, views and preferences on clients" (p. 6). If Kristen reflects on this ethical principle and feels that she cannot remain impartial and that client care may be impacted, it would be important for Kristen to speak to her manager/supervisor, and take steps to refer clients seeking information on MAiD to another social work colleague or appropriate health care provider.

Another issue highlighted in this scenario is the use of Facebook to share her personal values and beliefs about MAiD. Kristen would be encouraged to reflect on the privacy of her posts and consider the following questions:

- 1) Whose needs are taking priority?
- 2) Who has access to her Facebook page?
- 3) What if a client (who may be considering MAiD) sees this Facebook post?
- 4) How might this be interpreted by a client? Client's family members?
- 5) Could this impact the client's trust and confidence in Kristen? In the health care system?
- 6) How might this impact the social work profession in general?
- 7) How might Kristen's employer view this Facebook post?

In navigating this ethical dilemma consultation with a manager/supervisor is recommended. The NLASW has also produced an ethical decision-making tool that members can use in their practice. This document can be accessed online at www.nlasw.ca.

Scenario 3

Kerry RSW works for a non-profit organization. The community often donates clothing, household items and personal care items for clients served by the organization. These items are given to clients on a first come first serve basis. Kerry is working with a client (a single mother) who has indicated her need for a computer so that she can stay on top of employment opportunities and for her kids to use when completing their homework. Kerry recently purchased a new laptop and wonders if she should offer her old laptop to her client.

At first glance, the resolution of this dilemma may seem straight forward. Kerry has a client who needs a computer and Kerry has a laptop that she is willing to donate. However, there are many

ethical considerations; particularly as it relates to professional boundaries and her desire to ensure client access to resources. Reamer (2012) notes that “some boundary issues and dual relationships arise from professionals’ genuine efforts to be helpful” (p. 18).

In thinking through this ethical dilemma, a reflection on the following values from the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) would be important:

Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice

- Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits.

Value 3: Service to Humanity

- Social workers place the needs of others above self-interest when acting in a professional capacity.
- Social workers strive to use the power and authority vested in them as professionals in a responsible way that serves the needs of clients and the promotion of social justice.

Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice

- Social workers establish appropriate boundaries in relationships with clients and ensure the relationship serves the needs of clients.

In addition to a reflection on the CASW Code of Ethics (2005), the follow questions would be important to consider:

- 1) How are professional boundaries being impacted?
- 2) What are some of the risks/benefits of giving the client a laptop?
- 3) How might this gesture be interpreted by the client?
- 4) How might this impact on the social worker-client relationship?
- 5) How might this gesture be perceived by other clients of the organization? Would this type of gesture be extended to other clients?
- 6) Does the organization have a policy pertaining to gift giving to clients?
- 7) How would the social worker’s colleagues view this decision?
- 8) How is the social worker’s belief about social justice impact on her decision-making?
- 9) How would the social worker document this information?
- 10) What other options exist?

Kerry may find it helpful to consult with a colleague or supervisor to discuss the questions noted above and to seek other ways of accessing needed resources for her client. For example, she may

decide to donate the laptop to the organization, whereby the client can access this resource through the appropriate channels. Given the need for client access to technology, Kerry may also decide to advocate on behalf of the clients served by the organization for the donation of computers and/or laptops that clients can request; or help the client navigate community resources that exist for public use of computers and advocate on her own behalf. This would allow Kerry to maintain professional boundaries while continuing to advocate for access to services through a social justice framework.

Conclusion

Social justice is a core value of the social work profession. Social workers assist clients in navigating complex systems and accessing necessary services, resources and supports. This article highlights some of the ethical considerations social workers may need to consider when engaged in social justice activities. Critical reflection on the ethical considerations is an important tool for addressing these issues in practice. Social workers can reflect on the ethical values and principles in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005), consult with colleagues and one's supervisor/manager, and use professional judgement to navigate these issues in an ethical manner.

References/Resources

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