

Newfoundland & Labrador Association of  
**Social Workers**

STANDARDS FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE  
IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE  
*(Explanatory Document)*



Adopted May 5, 2016

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*Note: Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of and adhere to the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL, the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice.*

*Prior to the adoption of the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice, NLASW produced standards that highlighted best practices pertaining to culture competence in social work practice. These standards for cultural competence are incorporated into 2018 Standards of Practice. This explanatory document is a companion document to the 2018 Standards of Practice.*

## INTRODUCTION

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The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) is the regulatory body and professional association for social work in Newfoundland and Labrador. NLASW is responsible for regulating the practice of social work under provincial legislation titled the *Social Workers Act*, SNL 2010, c.S-17.2. The vision is *Excellence in Social Work*.

Respect for diversity is a fundamental value of the social work profession. As stated in the preamble for the CASW Code of Ethics (2005): “The social work profession is dedicated to the welfare and self-realization of people.....and the achievement of social justice for all. The profession has a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and/or living in poverty. Social workers are committed to human rights as enshrined in Canadian law, as well as in international conventions on human rights created or supported by the United Nations..... social workers respect the distinct systems of beliefs and lifestyles of individuals, families, groups, communities and nations without prejudice” (p. 3).

Newfoundland and Labrador is steeped in culture, and the context of social work practice continues to evolve. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to ensure they demonstrate cultural awareness and sensitivity in their practice while enhancing competence to work with people from diverse cultures.

As an organization, NLASW is committed to ensuring that members are engaged in the development of professional standards for the social work profession in Newfoundland and Labrador. In April 2014, social workers with an interest in informing the development of standards for cultural competence in social work practice were invited to become part of an ad-hoc committee. In June 2014, a short needs assessment to identify issues/areas to be addressed in the standards was distributed to all social workers. A thorough literature review was also completed. In February 2016, members were invited to review and provide feedback on the draft standards. The NLASW Board of Directors adopted the final document on May 5, 2016.

The *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* is grounded in the ethics and values of the social work profession, and builds upon the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) and Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005). The purpose of these standards is to:

- a) Inform social workers, employers and the public on best practice standards for social work practice with diverse cultures.
- b) Increase awareness of the practice considerations, ethical responsibilities and continuing professional education guidelines for fostering culturally competent practice.



- c) Provide a framework from which social workers can reflect on and enhance skills, knowledge and abilities to work with individuals, families, groups and communities from diverse cultures.
- d) Acknowledge the role of social workers in engaging and partnering with diverse cultures and the promotion of social justice.
- e) Promote cultural competence as an integral component of social work practice.



## STANDARDS FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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**Standard 1:** Culturally competent social work practice is grounded in the ethics and values of the social work profession.

**Standard 2:** Social workers recognize and appreciate the importance of being aware of one's own cultural identity and experiences in cross cultural practice.

**Standard 3:** Social workers seek to understand the values, beliefs, traditions and historical context of clients and incorporate this knowledge into social work assessments and interventions.

**Standard 4:** Social workers demonstrate the use of effective intervention skills when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

**Standard 5:** Social workers engage in continuing professional development to foster knowledge, skills and abilities in working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

**Standard 6:** Social workers engaged in the supervision of social work practice integrate cultural awareness and sensitivity in continued learning and skill development.

**Standard 7:** Social workers demonstrate leadership in cross-cultural practice.

**Standard 8:** Social workers ensure that cultural issues are addressed when providing social work services through electronic technology.



## DEFINITIONS

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### Social Work

According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2014):

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

The *Social Workers Act 2010* of Newfoundland and Labrador defines social work as:

the assessment, remediation and prevention of psycho-social problems and the enhancement of the social, psycho-social functioning of individuals, families, groups and communities by

- (i) providing direct counselling and therapy services to clients,
- (ii) developing, promoting and delivering human service programs, including those done in association with other professions,
- (iii) contributing to the development and improvement of social policy, and
- (iv) conducting research in the science, technique and practice of social work.

### Social Worker

In order to refer to oneself as a social worker or to practice within the scope of practice of the social work profession in Newfoundland and Labrador, an individual must be registered in accordance with the *Social Workers Act 2010*. Registered social workers are granted the RSW designation. Use of the RSW designation affirms that the individual has met the criteria for registration and has been granted use of the title and right to practice social work in Newfoundland and Labrador.

### Clients

Clients include a “person, family, group of persons, incorporated body, association or community on whose behalf a social worker provides or agrees to provide a service or to whom the social worker is legally obligated to provide service” (CASW, 2005a, p. 10). The word, “client,” acknowledges the power differential that exists between giver and receiver of service.



## WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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The Social Work Dictionary (2014) defines culture as “the customs, habits, skills, technology, arts, values, ideology, science, and religious and political behavior of a group of people in a specific time period” (p. 103). In addition to ethnicity, race, language and religious status, culture also captures gender and gender identity, age, ability, spirituality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

Cultural competence in social work practice is multi-faceted and many definitions exist. The National Association of Social Workers (2015) refers to cultural competence as the “process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each” (p. 13).

According to Kohli, Huber & Faul (2010) “Cultural competence engages the development of abilities and skills to respect differences and effectively interact with individuals from different backgrounds. This involves awareness of one’s biases or prejudices and is rooted in respect, validation, and openness toward differences among people. Cultural competence begins with an awareness of one’s own cultural beliefs and practices, and the recognition that others believe in different truths/realities than one’s own. It also implies that there is more than one way of doing the same thing in a right manner” (p. 257).

Cultural competence in these standards is an umbrella term for the knowledge and skills social workers require in working within the cultural context of clients. It incorporates cultural sensitivity, awareness, humility and safety. Cultural competence is an on-going process of learning, reflection, and professional growth.

The use of the word competence is consistent with the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) and the ethical value of competence in social work practice. It is also a recognized term used in the professional literature and implies action and accountability (Herring, Spangaro, Lauw & McNamara, 2013).



## STANDARDS FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE (ELABORATED)

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These standards are informed by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (2005), the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (2015), and relevant social work and professional literature.

**Standard 1:** Culturally competent social work practice is grounded in the ethics and values of the social work profession.

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) outlines the values and principles that guide professional social work practice. These values include:

- 1) Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons
- 2) Pursuit of Social Justice
- 3) Service to Humanity
- 4) Integrity in Professional Practice
- 5) Confidentiality in Professional Practice
- 6) Competence in Professional Practice

Social workers recognize and appreciate that differences exist amongst individuals, families, groups and communities. As stated in the Code of Ethics, “Social work is founded on a long-standing commitment to respect the inherent dignity and worth of all persons.....Social workers recognize and respect the diversity of Canadian society, taking into account the breadth of differences that exist among individuals, families, groups and communities” (p. 4).

Culturally competent practice requires a commitment to increasing one’s knowledge and appreciation for diverse cultures, embracing culture as a central focus in social work practice, and becoming aware of one’s own culture, values and beliefs and how these shape one’s own worldview.

In working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, social workers must navigate ethical issues pertaining to boundaries, dual and multiple relationships, conflicts in values and expectations, privacy and confidentiality, and decision-making within a cultural context. Social workers seek guidance from their colleagues, supervisors and managers and reflect on the Code of Ethics.

Through their practices, “Social workers oppose prejudice and discrimination against any person or group of persons, on any grounds, and specifically challenge views and actions that stereotype particular persons or groups” (CASW, 2005a, p.5). However, social workers do not



support or condone cultural traditions, rituals or beliefs that are contrary to human rights legislation and international conventions (i.e., Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities).

**Standard 2:** Social workers recognize and appreciate the importance of being aware of one's own cultural identity and experiences in cross cultural practice.

The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) states that “social workers acknowledge and respect the impact that their own heritage, values, beliefs and preferences can have on their practice and on clients whose background and values may be different from their own” (p. 4).

There are a number of factors that shape an individual's cultural experience including genetics, personality, professional ethics, social class, ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, historical context, and social norms (Basse & Melluish, 2013). In fostering culturally competent practice, social workers critically examine their own cultural awareness, heritage, biases and beliefs. Specifically social workers reflect on what informs their values, beliefs and worldview, including an acknowledgement of any ism's (i.e., ageism, racism, heterosexism, sexism, ethnocentrism, ableism, classism, homophobia, etc.), and the impact these may have when working with clients from diverse backgrounds.

Social workers need to be aware of their own personal and professional limitations and develop strategies for addressing biases that may impede on their ability to practice with clients from diverse cultures. Social workers also reflect on the privileges they hold by nature of their cultural experiences and professional status, and examine power dynamics in the professional relationship that may have an impact on the social work relationship.

Social workers recognize the relational nature of cross-cultural competence. When working with clients from diverse cultures, social workers seek to understand the client's cultural views and how this relates to their own worldview and experience of culture, and engage in collaborative dialogue with the client. As noted in the NASW (2015) Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice, “social workers need to be able to move from being aware of their own cultural heritage to becoming aware of the cultural heritage of others” (p. 23).

**Standard 3:** Social workers seek to understand the values, beliefs, traditions and historical context of clients and incorporate this knowledge into social work assessments and interventions.

Lee, Carlson and Senften (2014) note that “cultural competence has been identified as an essential part of treatment when social workers and other behavioral health providers work



with all people, not just those who are racially or ethnically different from themselves” (p. 59). It is therefore important that social workers acquire, or know how to acquire cultural knowledge relevant to the client. Preferably, the client should be the primary source of this information.

Social workers recognize that people experience culture in unique ways, and often have multiple cultural identities that intersect to shape their experiences, values, beliefs and traditions. Therefore, social workers avoid cultural generalizations and remain open to incorporating cultural humility into their practice. Cultural humility “involves the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to the aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the client” (Hook, Owen, Davis, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013, p. 354).

A person’s cultural experience may impact on how they perceive their psychosocial needs, solutions to address needs, and expectations/perceptions of the social work relationship. Clarifying expectations around social work interventions and help-seeking behaviors is important at the beginning of the therapeutic relationship. In addition, social workers should explore with clients sociocultural influences on health and well-being, along with the clients’ health beliefs, customs, rituals, cultural expressions, and conceptualization of the issue/concern.

Social workers have an ethical responsibility to “evaluate a client’s capacity to give informed consent as early in the relationship as possible” (CASW, 2005b, p.4). When working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, social workers understand that clients may not attach the same meaning to concepts addressed through informed consent (i.e., confidentiality, mental health, risk, recovery, healing, etc.). It is therefore necessary that social workers seek strategies to resolve potential misunderstandings and discuss this with the client. This may involve the proficient use of a cultural consultant and/or interpreter.

**Standard 4:** Social workers demonstrate the use of effective intervention skills when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Social workers uphold the right of clients to be offered the highest quality service (CASW Code of Ethics, 2005). When working with clients from diverse cultures, social workers reflect on their understanding of the role of culture throughout the helping process.

Social workers consider the following key areas in fostering cultural competence in practice:

*Knowledge:* The CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice notes that social workers:

- Strive to understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures (1.2.1).



- Seek a working knowledge and understanding of clients' racial and cultural affiliations, identities, values, beliefs and customs (1.2.4).

At a minimum, social workers should have a foundational knowledge of a client's culture (historical context, traditions, values, experience of oppression); recognizing the intersectionality of cultural identities, and an awareness of any cultural stereotypes or perceptions. It is also important that social workers strive for knowledge and understanding of oppression, colonization, discrimination, social positions, power, and privilege. While this understanding is important, social workers recognize that the experience of these is not the same for all individuals identifying with a particular culture.

*Skills:* Social workers strive for cultural competency at the micro, mezzo and macro levels of social work practice. As noted in the NASW (2015) Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice, "social workers demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the importance of culture in practice, policy and research" (p. 28).

Social workers a) demonstrate cultural humility in practice, b) strive to enhance knowledge and skills for conducting effective assessments which incorporates culture, c) increase skills for communicating effectively with clients, c) use conflict resolution strategies where applicable, d) effectively use interventions and skills that are sensitive to the client's cultural experience.

*Theoretical Foundation:* Social workers consider their use of theory, skills and intervention models to ensure cultural sensitivity and relevance to the client receiving services. The person-in-environment and strengths perspective provides a helpful framework for working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. The person-in-environment perspective views the individual within the context of his/her physical and social environment, and the strengths perspective places an emphasis on the client's strengths, capacities, assets and resiliency.

*Language:* Social workers strive to enhance competencies in cross cultural communication, and recognize the important role of language and communication when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. The CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice states: "Where possible, social workers provide or secure social work services in the language chosen by the client. If using an interpreter, when possible, social workers preferentially secure an independent and qualified professional interpreter" (p. 4). Where interpreter services are not available, social workers advocate for their implementation and explore alternative options for interpretation that are in keeping with the best interests of the client.

It is also important that social workers are attuned to the clients' non-verbal behaviors and communication style, and engage clients in a dialogue about the meaning attached to these



behaviors. For example, emotional display, eye contact, nodding, and touch may hold different meanings for individuals and members of diverse cultures.

*Self-Awareness:* Social workers acknowledge their own strengths and limitations in working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds and refer clients to another social worker or professional when necessary to ensure the client's needs are met. As outlined in the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice "Social workers at the earliest opportunity inform clients of any factor, condition, or pressure that affects their ability to practice adequately and competently" (p. 10).

Social workers appreciate that cultural competence is a fluid concept and continue to strive for cultural competence in practice. This involves a process of learning, re-learning, inquiry, consultation, and critical reflection. As noted by Williams (2006) "It is important to understand that cultural competence is not developed by choosing more correct than incorrect responses but instead by making thoughtful practice decisions with the best information available and learning through a process of reflection and evaluation how to do better in the future" (p. 218).

*Community Connections & Resources:* Social workers appreciate the role of community when working with individuals and families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Social workers should also be familiar with community resources that may be available for clients (i.e., peer supports, organizational or community based programming, community/cultural consultants) and provide clients with access to this information. This may also involve the building of collaborative relationships, including relationships with community leaders, elders and seniors, to promote awareness and understanding of the resources that exist with communities.

**Standard 5:** Social workers engage in continuing professional development to foster knowledge, skills and abilities in working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) highlights the ethical responsibility of social workers "to strive to maintain and increase their professional knowledge and skill" (p.8). Fostering cultural competence requires a commitment to life-long learning, self-reflection, and an on-going evaluation of one's knowledge, skills and abilities in working with clients from diverse cultures.

The acquisition of knowledge and skills for working with clients from diverse cultures can be obtained from formal and informal modes of learning which may include:

- Attending courses, workshops, webinars, and seminars that concentrate on cultural knowledge, theoretical models, cultural diversity and sensitivity, ethics, and best practice approaches for cross cultural practices.



- Reading journal articles and relevant research related to cultural competency.
- Engaging in discussions with colleagues and managers about cultural competency and their experiences.
- Meeting with people from various cultural backgrounds to learn about their culture, values, beliefs and traditions.
- Connecting with community agencies and resources that are pertinent to each client's needs.
- Consulting with clients on their experiences of program/service delivery and engaging in additional research to inform best practices.

**Standard 6:** Social workers engaged in the supervision of social work practice integrate cultural awareness and sensitivity in continued learning and skill development.

The standards highlighted in this document pertain to all forms of social work practice, including social work supervision. The NLASW Standards for Supervision of Social Work Practice (2011) outlines the specialized skills and knowledge required by supervisors to provide competent supervision. This includes knowledge of diversity and culturally competent practice, the ability to identify learning needs of supervisees, and the ability to assist supervisees establish measurable objectives for learning and performance.

Social workers who provide supervision ensure that social workers working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds have the appropriate orientation and preparation for practice, incorporate discussions of cultural diversity and competency in supervisory sessions, and work with the supervisee to access continuing professional development to enhance culturally competent practice.

**Standard 7:** Social workers demonstrate leadership in cross-cultural practice.

Social workers are committed to social justice and advancing human rights. As noted in the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) "Social workers strive to promote conditions that encourages respect for cultural and social diversity within Canada and globally. Social workers promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people" (p. 25).



Social workers demonstrate leadership to advance inclusive organizational policies and culturally informed services and programs, and to inform systemic change. Through their practices, social workers:

- Analyze policies, systems and organizational structures and their impact on people
- Advocate for equity, fairness and respect
- Collaborate with partners and other professions in advancing cultural knowledge and understanding
- Share information and knowledge to promote culturally informed practice
- Work in partnership with individuals, groups and communities to promote social justice and cultural awareness
- Contribute to social policy development that promotes diversity and human rights

**Standard 8:** Social workers ensure that cultural issues are addressed when providing social work services through electronic technology.

Technology use in social work practice continues to evolve and expand. The NLASW Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice (2012) sets best practice standards for the use of technology in professional practice. When social workers use technology in social work practice, it is important that cultural issues are considered. The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) released Model Regulatory Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice (2015) that speaks to technology use and culture. Specifically, the standards state that social workers should:

- “When delivering services, be aware of cultural differences among *clients* and in *clients’* use of digital and other electronic technology. Social workers shall assess cultural, environmental, and linguistic issues that may affect the delivery of services” (p. 4).
- “Provide information in a manner that is understandable and culturally appropriate for the client” (p. 5).
- “Social workers shall assess whether the use of electronic social work services is inclusive and consistent with a client’s cultural values and norms” (p. 6).
- “Be aware that cultural factors may influence the likelihood of discovering shared friend networks on websites, blogs, and other forms of social media. Social workers shall be aware that shared membership in cultural groups based on race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, religion, addiction recovery,



and other personal interests may create boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships. Social workers shall avoid conflicts of interest and inappropriate dual relationships based on their personal interests and online presence” (p. 8).

As technology use in social work practice advances, it is important that social workers continue to assess how technology and culture interact and ensure their own competence in the use of technology.



### **Acknowledgements**

The standards were developed with member input and consultation. In April 2014, the NLASW invited social workers with an interest in cultural competency to become part of an ad-hoc committee to inform the development of *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*. All NLASW members were invited to participate in an online needs assessment questionnaire, and a thorough literature review was completed. In February 2016, members were invited to review and provide feedback on the draft standards. The NLASW Board of Directors adopted the final document on May 5, 2016.

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