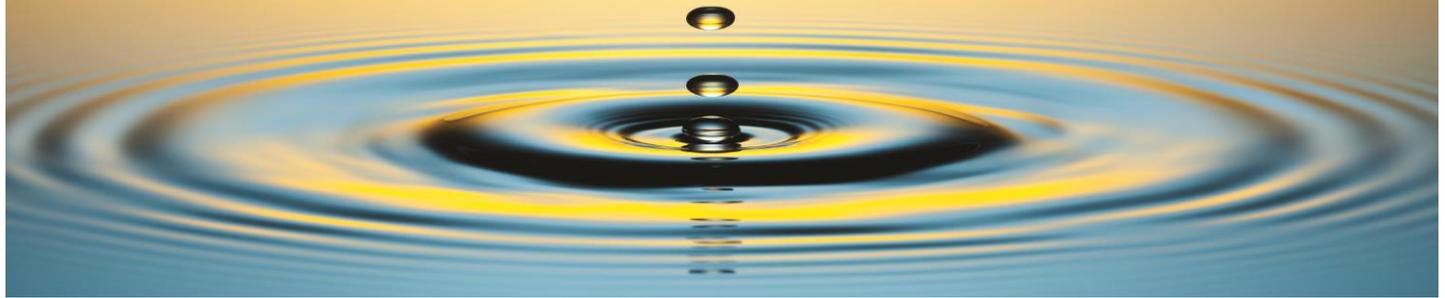


Practice Matters



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.

The Importance of Knowing Your Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice

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A professional is defined as “An individual who qualifies for membership in a specific *profession* and uses its practices, knowledge, and skills to provide services to client systems and, in doing so, always adheres to its *values* and *code of ethics*” (Barker, 2014, p 338). As professionals, social workers are accountable to a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, social work practice is regulated by the [Social Workers Act \(2010\)](#), 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](#). The commitment to be aware of and to adhere to these documents is affirmed at application for registration and annually during renewal.

This edition of Practice Matters will highlight the importance of knowing the CASW Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and NLCSW Standards of Practice across diverse fields of practice. Social workers are encouraged to reflect on their knowledge of these documents and how they are integrated into practice.

Knowledge & Use

What do the NLCSW Standards of Practice highlight about cultural competence in social work practice? What does the Code/Standards say about social work documentation? How does the Code/Standards address the disclosure of client information? Is technology use in social work practice addressed in the Code/Standards? Does the Code/Standards address social media use in social work practice? How does the Code/Standards address dual and multiple relationships and boundaries? What about conflicts of interest? These are common areas where social workers often seek ethical consultation. However, are social workers looking to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for guidance or clarity as part of their decision-making?

In a research study on the use of the CASW Code of Ethics in social work practice in NL, respondents were asked what would be most helpful to them when resolving an ethical dilemma. Only 6.1% of respondents indicated the Code of Ethics as their first choice; peer consultation followed by supervision were the top choices (Johns & Crockwell, 2009). While peer consultation and supervision are of utmost importance, a review of the ethical standards and guidelines can inform and enrich these discussions, provide guidance, and help social workers make sound ethical decisions, even when the resolution may not be straightforward.

Fundamentally social workers aspire to the broad ethical values outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics. However, the CASW Code of Ethics, along with the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice and the NLCSW Standards of Practice outlines the practice requirements for social workers in NL to ensure safe, ethical, and competent professional practice. It covers areas related to informed consent, documentation, boundaries and conflicts of interest, competence, confidentiality and disclosure of client information, technology use, culture and diversity, advocacy, and professionalism and accountability. Therefore, social workers need to delve deeper into these documents so that they have a clear understanding of what the specific standards and guidelines are, and that they can justify decisions being made in professional practice through an ethical framework. These documents are important tools for social workers to use in resolving ethical dilemmas and supporting practice decisions.

Social workers are encouraged to reflect on the following questions:

- 1) How often do I review the CASW Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice and NLCSW Standards of Practice?
- 2) How aware am I of the specific ethical and practice requirements outlined in these regulatory and practice documents?

- 3) When faced with an ethical dilemma, do I consult the CASW Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice and NLCSW Standards of Practice? Am I able to justify my decisions based on the ethical guidelines and standards?
- 4) Do I use the CASW Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice and NLCSW Standards of Practice to inform my continuing education planning?
- 5) Do I use these documents when engaging in peer consultation and supervision?

Case Scenarios

Case Scenario 1

Kaitlyn RSW has been practicing social work for 5 years. A family member of a recently deceased client contacted Kaitlyn to ask for a copy of the client's clinical file. This is the first question of this nature that Kaitlyn has received. Kaitlyn takes some time to consider how best to respond and review practice guidelines.

The disclosure of client information is addressed in the CASW Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice and NLCSW Standards of Practice, and can provide guidance to Kaitlyn.

CASW Code of Ethics

Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice

“Social workers only disclose confidential information with the informed consent of the client or permission of client's legal representative” (p. 8).

CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice

- 1.5 Social workers protect clients' identity and only disclose confidential information to other parties (including family members) with the informed consent of clients or the clients' legally authorized representatives, or when required by law or court order. This obligation continues indefinitely after the social worker has ceased contact with the client.
- 1.5.11 Social workers protect the confidentiality of deceased clients consistent with the preceding responsibilities.

NLCSW Standards of Practice

Standard 6: Social workers respect a client's right to privacy and confidentiality and only disclose client information with the consent of clients, or when required by law or court order.

When Kaitlyn met the client at the beginning of the social worker-client relationship, they clearly explained how information would be documented, who would have access, and the limits to confidentiality. This was documented in the client file as part of the informed consent process. In reflecting on the current request for the client's information, Kaitlyn is able to think through this issue by revisiting the client's file and information pertaining to informed consent and confidentiality, and consulting the CASW Code of Ethics and NLCSW Standards of Practice. Client confidentiality is an ethical responsibility that social workers hold in high regard and understanding one's ethical responsibilities pertaining to the disclosure of client information is important. Kaitlyn also reviews the following NLCSW related practice documents:

[Practice Matters: Informed Consent - A Professional and Ethical Responsibility](#)

[Documentation Matters: Tip #6 How should I handle requests for the release of client information?](#)

[Ethical Compass: The Ethics of Disclosing Client Information](#)

While Kaitlyn's client is deceased, the standards pertaining to confidentiality remain the same. With this ethical grounding, Kaitlyn is able to discuss their professional responsibility with the client's family member in a respectful and transparent manner.

Case Scenario 2

Brianna, RSW provides mental health counselling and therapy, and virtual care is a common practice. One of her clients is going to Ontario for a few months to take care of an ailing parent. The client informs Brianna about this temporary leave from the province and requests to continue with virtual care. Brianna wonders if this is something she is able to do.

Brianna consults the CASW Code of Ethics and CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice. The issue of interjurisdictional practice is not addressed in these documents. Brianna understands that the NLCSW Standards of Practice is also a regulatory document that she must review to ensure that she is able to ethically, and legally, provide virtual care to a client temporarily residing in another jurisdiction. Standard 9 in the NLCSW Standards of Practice provides Brianna with guidance.

NLCSW Standards of Practice – Standard 9 – Interjurisdictional Practice

“Social workers who provide social work services across jurisdictions must comply with the regulatory requirements in the jurisdiction in which the social worker resides and the jurisdiction in which the client resides” (p.10).

“Social workers engaged in interjurisdictional practice have the appropriate professional liability insurance” (p.10).

“Social workers providing services to a client in another jurisdiction, comply with legislation and reporting requirements (i.e., reporting child protection concerns) in that jurisdiction” (p. 10).

Prior to agreeing to provide services to the client while they are living in Ontario, Brianna connects with the social work regulatory body in Ontario to inquire about registration requirements in that jurisdiction. Brianna also reviews practice resources produced by the NLCSW including the following:

[Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice \(Explanatory Document\)](#)

[Interjurisdictional Social Work Practice FAQ & Practice Guidance for Social Workers in NL](#)

[Practice Matters: Electronic Social Work Practice](#)

[Practice Matters: Informed Consent: A Professional and Ethical Responsibility](#)

[Documentation Matters: Tip #3 What things should I consider pertaining to the documentation of electronic social work services?](#)

[Technology Use in Social Work Practice Webinar](#)

Brianna carefully considers all the information and proceeds in a manner which aligns with the Standards pertaining to interjurisdictional practice, informed consent, and technology use in social work practice.

Case Scenario 3

Karen RSW works in a small rural community. She was recently approached by a former client and invited on a date. While Karen is single and interested in dating, she wonders how best to handle this request from a former client. She consults the CASW Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice and NLCSW Standards of Practice.

In her review of the Code, Karen notes the following values:

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.

Karen understands the importance of client best interest and professional boundaries, but the CASW Code does not specifically speak to the issue of personal relationships with former clients. Therefore, Karen reviews the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and notes the following:

2.1 Appropriate Professional Boundaries

2.1.1 Social workers maintain appropriate professional boundaries throughout the course of the professional relationship and after the professional relationship.

2.4 Dual and Multiple Relationships

2.4.1 Social workers take care to evaluate the nature of dual or multiple relationships to ensure that the needs and welfare of their clients are protected.

2.6 No Romantic or Sexual Relationships with Clients

- 2.6.1 Social workers do not engage in romantic relationships, sexual activities or sexual contact with clients, even if such contact is sought by clients.
- 2.6.2 Social workers who have provided psychotherapy or in-depth counselling do not engage in romantic relationships, sexual activities or sexual contact with former clients. It is the responsibility of the social worker to evaluate the nature of the professional relationship they had with a client and to determine whether the social worker is in a position of power and/or authority that may unduly and/or negatively affect the decisions and actions of their former client.

The NLCSW Standards of Practice also speak to the importance of professional boundaries. Specifically, Standard 13 (Dual and Multiple Relationships) notes:

- Social workers evaluate potential or actual dual or multiple relationships to ensure that the client's interest remains primary.
- Where dual or multiple relationships exists, social workers are responsible for ensuring that appropriate boundaries are established and maintained, and that the social worker-client relationship is safe guarded.

Karen feels that the practice documents provide clear guidance on how she should handle her former client's request for a date. Karen also decides to seek consultation to inform her decision-making and

uses the NLCSW document [Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work Practice](#) to ensure that she considers all the ethical elements.

Case Scenario 4

Tess RSW has practiced social work for 15 years. As a recent supervisor, she is worried about some of the concerns staff have brought forward with regards to workplace culture and the behavior of a social work colleague (e.g., being negative and disrespectful to colleagues, not showing up for work on time, not completing documentation). Tess understands that social workers have an ethical responsibility to the workplace and the profession, and wonders if there is anything helpful in the CASW Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice and NLCSW Standards of Practice that could provide some guidance (in addition to workplace and human resource policies).

Value 4 of the CASW Code of Ethics – Integrity in Professional Practice – is important. “Social workers maintain a high level of professional conduct by acting honestly and responsibly, and promoting the values of the profession” (p. 6)

The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice speaks to one’s ethical responsibility to colleagues.

3.1 Respect – Social workers relate to both social work colleagues and colleagues from other disciplines with respect, integrity and courtesy and seek to understand differences in viewpoints and practice (p. 13).

3.3 Management of Disputes – Social workers remain open to constructive comment on their practice or behavior (p. 14)

3.3.1 – Social workers who have ethical concerns about the actions of a colleague attempt to resolve the disagreement through appropriate channels established by their organization. If the disagreement cannot be resolved, social workers pursue other avenues to address their concerns consistent with client well-being, ethical principles and obligations outlined by their regulatory body (p. 14).

4.3.2 – Social workers strive to promote effective teamwork and communication and an efficient and accountable social work service.

The NLCSW Standards of Practice also highlights collegial relationships and professionalism. It notes “Social workers demonstrate respect, integrity and courtesy when relating to social work colleagues and colleagues from other professions” (p. 8) & “Social workers concerned about the professional practice of a colleague shall take reasonable steps to address the issue. This may

include talking directly with the social worker, consulting with one's supervisor, and/or informing the regulatory body" p. 18).

After reviewing all the documents, Tess meets with the social worker with whom colleagues have expressed concerns with regards to behavior, and reviews the social workers ethical responsibilities to colleagues, the workplace, and clients. They develop a plan for mitigating concerns raised by the social worker's colleagues and identify strategies for the completion of timely documentation. This supervision session is documented in accordance with agency policy. During a monthly team meeting, Tess takes the opportunity to showcase NLCSW practice documents. She highlights the professional responsibility social workers have in knowing about, and adhering to, the CASW Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and the NLCSW Standards of Practice.

Take-Aways...Why it is Important to Know Your Code of Ethics, Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and Standards of Practice

- Demonstrates a commitment to ethical and professional practice.
- Provides essential practice guidelines.
- Promotes professional social work practice.
- Informs ethical decision-making.
- Supports practice decisions.
- Mitigates risk through an ethical framework.
- Assists when allegations are made against one's practice.

Conclusion

Social workers are dedicated to advancing and promoting the profession through a shared commitment to provide ethical, professional, competent, and high-quality social work services in the best interests of clients. This edition of Practice Matters highlighted the responsibility social workers have to be aware of, and adhere to, the CASW Code of Ethics, CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice and the NLCSW Standards of Practice as part of this commitment. A regular review of these documents is important. NLCSW also has a wealth of practice resources that provides guidance, interpretation and clarity on the guidelines and standards which can be accessed on the NLCSW website at www.nlcsw.ca.

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