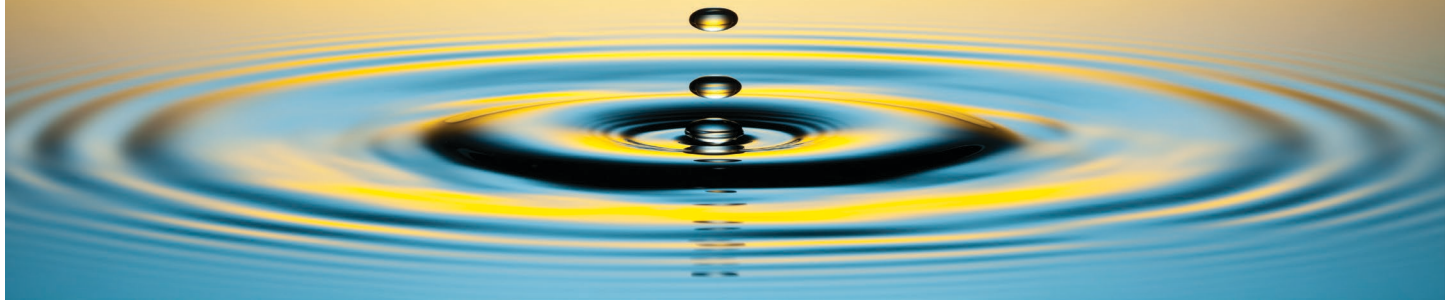


Newfoundland & Labrador Association of

**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.*

## **Electronic Social Work Practice**

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The delivery of electronic social work services is not new to the social work profession. One of the first references to technology use in social work practice was in 1917 when Mary Richmond discussed the use of the telephone in practice. The first mental health crisis line was introduced in Newfoundland and Labrador in 1996. Currently, online therapy and psychosocial support is being provided by social workers in diverse fields of practice and the use of technology in practice continues to expand. This edition of Practice Matters will explore some of the ethical and regulatory issues social workers must consider as they continue to integrate technology into practice. Relevant resources produced by NLASW will also be referenced throughout the document.

### **Electronic Social Work Services (Definition)**

**Electronic social work services** is defined by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice as "the use of computers (including the Internet, social media, online chat, text, and email) and other electronic means (such as smartphones, landline telephones, and video technology) to (a) provide information to the public, (b) deliver social work services to **clients**, (c) communicate with **clients**, (d) manage confidential information and case records, (e) store and access information about **clients**, and (f) arrange payment for professional services" (p. 1).

## NLASW Standards of Practice

The NLASW produced Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice in 2012. This explanatory document highlights best practices in the use of technology and have been integrated into the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. The following standards are relevant to electronic service delivery:

- Competence
- Informed Consent
- Documentation and Record Keeping
- Confidentiality
- Technology
- Interjurisdictional Practice
- Social Media
- Dual and Multiple Relationships
- Conflicts of Interest
- Professionalism and Accountability

Social workers must be familiar with and adhere to the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice. While many of the ethical and practice issues remain the same regardless of the medium used, there are some areas related to technology that social workers must consider as they make decisions in the best interest of their clients that are in keeping with the ethics, values and standards of the social work profession. Consider the following case scenarios:

### Case Scenario 1

Kate works in mental health and addictions. One of her clients expresses interest in receiving virtual counselling and approaches Kate with the idea. The client tells Kate that she finds it difficult to travel to sessions and having the ability to attend virtually would be easier. Kate consults with her manager.

Kate and her manager review the NLASW (2018)-Standards of Practice and considered the following questions:

- Does the organization have the available technology to provide virtual services?
- What technology does the client have access to?
- Can Kate provide the client with the same level of care through a virtual platform?
- Does Kate feel competent in the use of technology to deliver services?
- What are the risks/benefits of providing virtual care?

- What are the limits to client confidentiality and privacy?
- What other options exist for the client for continued care?

After working through these questions, Kate plans to speak with the client about the risk and benefits of incorporating technology into practice and the plan for continued service delivery as part of the informed consent process.

## **Case Scenario 2**

Krista is the manager of a social work team interested in providing electronic social work services to their clientele. The team has worked through the planning stages, and training was provided to all members of the team. The team is now in the process of updating their informed consent process and are meeting to discuss important considerations.

As noted in the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice “Informed consent is integral to the therapeutic alliance between a client and social worker, and is in keeping with a client’s right to self-determination, autonomy, dignity, privacy and respect” (p. 5). While having an informed consent form is important, the process of informed consent, having open and honest dialogue with the client, and answering client questions is a vital part of the process.

Standard 8 of the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice addresses technology and informed consent. The following are important for Krista and her team to consider:

- Social workers inform clients about technologies that are being used in the delivery of social work services, including the inherent risks and opportunities.
- Social workers develop a plan in the event of technology failures or interruptions to ensure best interest of the client.
- Social workers develop risk management strategies and inform clients of precautions that are being taken to minimize potential breaches of client information such as encrypted e-mails, firewalls, and passwords.
- Social workers discuss with clients the type of information appropriate for e-mail/text in keeping with organizational policies, the Code of Ethics and best practice guidelines.

Social workers should also review their documentation practices and provide information about record retention and access and documentation of emails/messages/text.

When providing e-services to clients, social workers should also “assess appropriateness of e-service delivery for each client, and where appropriate offer an alternate service or provide a referral to

another professional” and “assess that use of technology is consistent with the client’s cultural norms and practices” (NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice). This is an important conversation in the informed consent process.

Other issues for discussion include how emergencies will be handled, available community resources, and social work availability outside of scheduled sessions.

The NLASW ‘Self-Assessment Tools for Informed Consent and Documentation’ produced in 2017 contains helpful information and a checklist to review when developing an informed consent template. This document can be accessed on the NLASW website at <https://nlasw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Self-Assessment Tools for Informed Consent and Documentation.pdf>. BMS, the professional liability insurer through CASW, also has an informed consent template that can be accessed at <https://nlasw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/BMS Template Consent To Use Electronic Communications.pdf>.

### **Case Scenario 3**

Maria works in private practice. A client is relocating to another province and asks Maria if they can continue therapy virtually. Maria provides virtual care as part of her private practice, but her clients have been residents of NL. Maria wonders if she can provide electronic social work services to clients living in another jurisdiction.

Maria reviews the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL and the standard pertaining to interjurisdictional practice. As outlined in the Standards:

Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of interjurisdictional issues when providing therapy or social work services in another jurisdiction.

- a) 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.
- b) Social workers engaged in interjurisdictional practice have the appropriate liability insurance.
- c) Social workers providing services to a client in another jurisdiction, comply with the legislation and reporting requirements (i.e., reporting child protection concerns) in that jurisdiction. (p. 10)

Maria finds links to Canadian social work regulatory bodies on the NLASW website. Prior to agreeing to the provision of virtual counselling, Maria reaches out to the regulatory body in the jurisdiction where her client is relocating to inquire about registration requirements that are necessary to provide

electronic services in that jurisdiction. Maria has professional liability insurance and confirms with her insurer that her policy includes electronic service delivery across jurisdictions. Maria is now able to discuss with the client their options for service delivery across jurisdictions as part of the ongoing informed consent process.

#### **Case Scenario 4**

Dan provides electronic social work services to his clientele using a virtual platform. He has used emails for booking and confirming appointments. Dan receives a frantic email at midnight from a client experiencing a crisis. Dan does not see the email until the next morning and is quite concerned about the client. Dan is not meeting with the client until the following week and wonders what he needs to do in the interim.

In thinking through this dilemma, the following questions/issues are important.

- 1) Client safety – Dan needs to consider how best to respond to the client to assess safety and needed services. Does he have up to date contact information for the client? Is an email response appropriate?
- 2) Was emergency planning discussed as part of the informed consent process?
- 3) Was the issue of client emails/texts/online messages addressed with the client as part of the informed consent?

The NLASW (2012) Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice (Explanatory Document) notes that ‘when electronic communication is used to connect with clients, social workers should have clear policies in place around response times and how this information is documented’ (p. 6). After Dan deals with the crisis, he revisits his policy to ensure that electronic communication with clients and emergency planning is included as part of the ongoing informed consent process. As noted in the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice “when social workers communicate with clients via e-mail/text, social workers discuss with clients the type of information appropriate for e-mail/text in keeping with organizational policies, the Code of Ethics and best practice guidelines. This information should be clearly documented in the client file” (p. 9). Therefore, Dan needs to communicate with clients about social work availability outside the scheduled sessions and where clients can access emergency or crisis services. Dan also needs to ensure that he has up to date contact information for clients and can readily access this during an emergency. Dan might also want to consider having an automated message on his email that provides contact information for crisis services.

Documentation of the email received from the client and Dan's actions to address the situation should be documented in the client file. As noted in the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice "electronic communication that is of clinical significance should be documented in the client file" (p. 6). Letting the client know that this information is being documented is also a key part of the informed consent process.

Boundaries is another consideration in this scenario. The NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice notes "social workers maintain appropriate professional online boundaries" (p.9). Dan is responsible for establishing appropriate clinical boundaries and having this conversation with clients. Some questions for consideration might include: Did the client reach out to Dan as his therapist? What are the client's expectations from the clinical relationship? Has the client challenged boundaries in other ways? Conversations that Dan has with the client pertaining to boundaries should also be document in the client file. Dan should revisit this as necessary throughout the duration of the social worker-client relationship.

## Conclusion

This edition of Practice Matters explored issues pertaining to the delivery of electronic social work services within the context of the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL. Social workers have a professional responsibility to be aware of and adhere to the Standards of Practice and make decisions that are in keeping with the best interests of clients and the values and standards of the profession. The Standards can be found on the NLASW website at [www.nlasw.ca](http://www.nlasw.ca). Consultation with one's supervisor/manager and reviewing practice resources produced by the NLASW is also recommended.

**References/Resources**

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