

# Ethical Compass



Ethical Compass is an initiative of the NLASW Ethics Committee and is intended as a resource for members. The issues covered in this publication have been identified by social workers as part of the NLASW ethical consultation process and from a review of ethical trends in practice.

## Ethical Decision-Making and Documentation

Social work documentation is a vital and integral component of professional, ethical and competent practice. Social workers are required to maintain client records that include client information, professional observations, clinical decisions, intervention strategies and client outcomes. But what about the documentation of one's ethical decision-making?

The NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) states: "social workers document their ethical decision-making process and decisions" (p.11). Every day, social workers work through ethical challenges and dilemmas in practice. Issues pertaining to boundaries and dual relationships, conflicts of interest, termination of the social worker client-relationship, and disclosure of client information create some of the more frequent ethical challenges. While the focus in practice is on resolving these ethical issues, it is important that social workers consider how to document their decision-making in the client record.

When framing a clinical note regarding ethical decision-making, members can use the guideline document produced by the NLASW Ethics Committee in 2015 *Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work Practice*. In the note, you will want to clearly articulate the dilemma, speak to the values outlined in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, reference any standards of practice that you reviewed, revisit if the issue was covered through the informed consent process, note any cultural considerations, document if you had this discussion with your client, and any consultation you had with a manager or supervisor. As clients can request access to their record, it is important to write the note with the expectation that a client will read it. Therefore, only information pertaining to client care should be included in the client record. According to Reamer (2005) as noted in the NLASW (2014) *Standards for Social Work Recording*, social workers should not document disagreements with a manager or supervisor, staffing issues, or concerns about the professional practice of a colleague in the client file. Social workers should consult within their organizations on how these situations should be documented such as in a supervisory or administrative record.

Informed consent is one of the best mechanisms for preventing or dealing with an ethical dilemma in practice. Informed consent is defined as “a voluntary agreement reached between a capable client based on information about foreseeable risks and benefits associated with the agreement (e.g., participation in counselling or agreement to disclose social work report to a third party)” (CASW, 2005, p. 10). This process is integral to the therapeutic alliance between a client and social worker, and is important to document in a client file. In 2017, the NLASW Ethics Committee released a *Self-Assessment Tool for Informed Consent and Documentation*. The document consists of a checklist that social workers can use to evaluate informed consent practices. For example, as part of the informed consent process social workers can address issues pertaining to the release of client information, limits to confidentiality, termination of the social worker-client relationship, and information on boundaries in practice. Social workers not only discuss these issues at the beginning of the professional relationship, but throughout the duration of the relationship as necessary.

The use of a social media policy is a great example of how informed consent can be used to prevent or resolve ethical dilemmas (i.e., Facebook friend requests from clients). If, as part of the informed consent process, a social worker provides the client with information on their social media policies, the social worker can ethically and effectively address a Facebook friend request from a client by reminding the client of their social media policy and the importance of this policy to the therapeutic alliance. Information noting the receipt of the Facebook friend request and how it was addressed with the client can be written into the clinical note.

Documenting ethical decision-making can be a “pause for thought” strategy. In considering your options for the resolution of an ethical dilemma, it can be helpful to ask, “is this something that I feel comfortable documenting?” If not, more thought and consultation to resolve the dilemma may be warranted. “Pause for thought” is a great risk management strategy

Documentation and ethical decision-making go hand in hand. NLASW has a wealth of resources that social workers can use in their practice that can be found on the NLASW website at [www.nlasw.ca](http://www.nlasw.ca).

#### References:

CASW. (2005). *Code of ethics*. Ottawa, ON: Author.

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Reamer, F. (2005). Documentation in social work: Evolving ethical and risk-management standards. *Social Work, 50*(4), 325-334.