

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.

The Ethics of Competence

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Social Work is a diverse and complex profession. Social workers are employed across several fields of practice, within a variety of position descriptions and titles. The scope of practice of the profession is broad and the legislative definition encompasses a range of activities including direct counselling, administration, policy analysis and research.

All social workers adhere to a code of ethics governing practice. The Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2005) sets forth values and principles to guide professional conduct. This document outlines six core social work values. These include respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons, pursuit of social justice, service to humanity, integrity in professional practice, confidentiality in professional practice and competence in professional practice.

The Code of Ethics expands upon the value statement relating to competence asserting that

Social workers respect a client's right to competent social worker services....Social workers have a responsibility to maintain professional proficiency, to continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply new knowledge commensurate with their level of professional education, skill and competency, seeking consultation and supervision as appropriate. (p.8)

One of the principles outlined in this section of the Code states “*social workers demonstrate due care for client’s interests and safety by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence*”. (p.8). Social workers who meet the criteria for registration have the competencies to practice in a wide range of settings engaging in a variety of practice modalities. So what exactly does this principle mean?

This edition of *Practice Matters* will examine how we as social workers determine our own level of competency for various fields of practice. It will reflect on three questions: What is competency? How is it assessed? How are competencies transferred and enhanced?

What is competency?

Competency is defined as the “demonstrated ability of an individual to accomplish an activity, task or professional act” (OPTSQ 2005, p. 13). All professionals need to possess certain competencies in order to practice. These can be categorized in four areas:

- 1) Personal Competencies which are personal values and attitudes required across all types of work. Examples are empathy, integrity and respect.
- 2) General Competencies are generic skills required across various types of work such as oral/written communication skills and organizational abilities.
- 3) Entry to Practice Competencies are the knowledge, skills and abilities specific to an occupation that a professional should be able to demonstrate on the first day of practice.
- 4) Advanced occupationally specific competencies are competencies that professionals acquire as they practice the profession and engage in advanced study. (CCSWR 2012)

Although listed as distinct categories, personal and professional competencies are related. For example, conducting a psycho-social assessment is a professional competency which is enhanced by the personal competencies of listening, perceptiveness and analysis. Critical thinking is a personal competency which is essential for effective social work practice.

Barker (1995) offers the following definition of competence as it relates to social work practice:

Competence in social work includes possession of all relevant educational and experiential requirements, demonstrated ability through passing licensing and certification exams and the ability to carry out work assignments and achieve social work goals while adhering to the values of the profession

A discussion of competence within the profession can have many facets. There is competence to:

- transfer from one field of practice to another (ex) mental health to long term care;

- use specific therapies and techniques within fields of practice (ex) family therapy, EMDR ;
- perform different types of practice (ex) supervision, policy analysis, community development;
- work with populations (ex) children, seniors, culturally diverse groups

How is competency assessed?

There are various methods by which competencies in professional practice are measured and there is debate about the most effective. Methods for measuring competency include successful completion of education leading to a credential, competency based examinations and assessments which combine education and experience.

The Bachelor of Social Work degree is the educational foundation upon which social work practice is based. Entry into the profession in this province requires an individual to “*hold a bachelors, masters or doctoral degree in social work from an accredited educational institution approved by the board*”. (Social Workers Act 2010 Section 18 (2) (a)). Registration based upon successful completion of the degree has been the public’s assurance that an individual has the requisite knowledge, skills and abilities to practice.

Social workers enhance competency through additional education, experience, consulting with others and obtaining supervision. This applies not only to direct clinical practice but to social work in the areas of supervision, management, policy and research. The intent of the NLASW Continuing Professional Education Policy is to facilitate the life-long learning which is required of any professional to maintain the duty of competence over the course of one’s career.

How are competencies transferred and enhanced in social work practice?

To address this question, case scenarios will be considered.

Scenario#1: I have been practicing social work in the area of health policy for 10 years and I am interested in changing to direct practice in gerontology. I hope to work in a long term care facility. Do I possess the requisite competencies to make this transfer and how do I know?

Scenario #2: I graduated with a bachelor of social work degree two years ago. I have been working with an employment program and would now like to set up a private practice providing addictions counselling with youth. Am I ready?

To assist with the self assessment of this ethical principle, each of these social workers initially consulted the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) which states:

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Social workers demonstrate due care for client's interest and safety by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence (p.8).

and noted that the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) assert that:

Social workers do not claim formal social work education in an area of expertise or training solely by attending a lecture, demonstration, conference, workshop or similar teaching presentation (Section 7.1.4 p. 22)

Next, they reflected upon the following questions:

- 1) What is my experience in this specific field of practice?
- 2) What continuing education have I completed?
- 3) What is my commitment to obtaining further education in this field?
- 4) Is there a standardized measurement of competency for this type of practice? Can I provide evidence of my competency in this area?
- 5) Do best practice standards or guidelines exist? For example NLASW Standards for Supervision of Social Work Practice; NLASW Complementary and Adjunct Therapies & Techniques: A Guide for Registered Social Workers.
- 6) What will be my access to supervision and consultation in this new area?
- 7) What are my identified gaps and how will I address them?
- 8) What type of orientation and ongoing training in this field of practice is available?
- 9) What are the criteria for the position in this field of practice?

Finally, they consulted with other social workers experienced in the fields of interest and arrived at the following decisions.

- 1) As part of her health policy practice, the social worker has kept current in issues related to senior's health that will assist her in her work in a long term care setting. Because of her interest in this field she has attended a number of education events related to various aspects of seniors care and recently completed a course to refresh her clinical skills. She has made a commitment to continue self directed learning and to avail of as many opportunities to engage in continuing education as possible. The position of interest lists the BSW as the educational qualification and she knows that if successful she will be working with another registered social worker who is quite experienced and with whom she would have good access for consultation. She feels confident that her skills are transferrable and she is ready to demonstrate this in an employment interview and a new field of practice.

- 2) The social worker in the second scenario has worked with clients with addictions issues but has not provided therapeutic intervention. She has reviewed the NLASW Private Practice Policy which outlines best practice guidelines. She has not engaged in additional education in the addictions field. This combined with limited experience and an uncertain access to supervision has led her to reconsider her choice. This social worker has decided to pursue further education and to seek employment in the public sector. She has determined that working with others in a field that she thinks she will enjoy is a better route for now. She has decided to prepare to apply for position opportunities where she can gain further experience with addictions.

Conclusion:

There are many factors which must be considered when assessing the meaning of competence in professional practice. Social workers who meet the criteria for registration have the competencies to practice in a wide range of settings engaging in a variety of practice modalities. Continuing education, related experience and the benefits of access to supervision are critical. Throughout the span of a career, social workers should constantly enhance knowledge and strengthen skills. This document is intended to identify the issue of competence as an ethical value and to raise questions to assist with self reflection and assessment. Further review of the Code of Ethics, documents related to best practices and consultation for the individual circumstances being contemplated is strongly recommended.

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