

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.

‘Can You Help Me’? The ethics of giving professional advice to a friend, neighbor or colleague

A neighbor asks you for advice on dealing with her rebellious teenager. They are on a waitlist for services and figured you could help them faster even though you work in community supports. A colleague wants to talk to you about the stress he is under and how it is affecting his mental health. You are both employed in a community organization. One of your friends asks for your advice in helping her nephew who is dealing with an opioid addiction. Your friend knows that you work in mental health and addictions. At one point or another in our careers we may have been asked by friends/neighbors/colleagues for our ‘opinions’ or advice. Naturally, they think we have a lot to offer because of our training and expertise. But are they seeking a personal or a professional opinion, and can we clearly separate the two? This edition of the Ethical Compass will explore this issue through an ethical framework and highlight areas for consideration.

While the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics does not specifically address the issue of requests for advice or an opinion from neighbors, friends and colleagues, a review of the Code and the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers is important. Asking the question “how might my colleagues respond in a similar circumstance?” can also be helpful. What would be considered a reasonable response? If a friend/neighbor/colleague presents in an emergency, it would be reasonable to expect that the social worker would provide some input on how to deescalate the situation and provide information on where services/supports could be accessed. However, what about those gray or “in the moment situations” that are not crisis driven?

In working through these types of dilemmas, a reflection on Value 4: *Integrity in professional practice* is particularly important. Issues such as dual and multiple relationships, boundaries, and informed consent should be considered in one’s decision-making. The following reflection questions would also be helpful:

- What is your first instinct for resolving the conflict?
- Am I acting as a social worker or a friend? Am I being clear about my role?

- What is the intent of the request?
- Where does this request fall along the continuum from friendly advice or feedback to professional service delivery?
- Does this create a blend between my personal and professional life?
- How might my opinion or feedback be perceived? Does this give the perception that I am providing a 'social work service'?
- Could this create a real or potential conflict of interest?
- Am I competent to speak to the issue that is being raised by the friend/neighbor/colleague?
- Whose needs are being met?
- How might this impact future service provision?
- If the request is coming from a colleague, how might this impact the collegial relationship? What if you have concerns about the practice of your colleague following the disclosure? Would this information need to be documented?
- How would this impact on my own self-care?

Social workers are responsible for establishing appropriate boundaries in practice and making decisions in the best interests of clients. While having a friend/neighbor/colleague ask for advice or an opinion does not make them a client, it is the responsibility of the social worker to establish clear boundaries and define the parameters of what advice or opinions can be given, and the context in which it is given. What expectations does the person have for seeking advice or an opinion and what potential dilemmas can this create for the social worker? If dealing with a colleague, the appropriate response might be to refer one's colleague to another social worker or an EAP program. If a friend or neighbor is seeking a particular service, helping them navigate how to access these services may be the preferred response. This keeps the 'client's' interest primary and the boundaries intact. Having these boundaries is also an important self-care strategy.

This edition of the Ethical Compass explored some of the issues and questions social workers should consider when asked for advice or an opinion by a friend/neighbor/colleague. It is always good to take a proactive stance and reflect on how you would respond in these situations so that you will be well equipped for when it happens 'in the moment'. Peer consultation would also be helpful in navigating these dilemmas along with a review of the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics & Guidelines for Ethical Practice, NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice and NLASW's ethical decision-making resource guide.

References:

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

CASW. (2005). *Guidelines for ethical practice*. Ottawa, ON: Author.

NLASW. (2018). *Standards of practice for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. Johns, NL: Author.

NLASW. (2015). *Ethical decision-making in social work practice*. St. John's, NL: Author.