

Newfoundland & Labrador  
**College of  
Social Workers**

**Health & Social Policy Advocacy  
Guideline Document for Social Workers**

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## INTRODUCTION

Social work is a profession committed to enhancing the health and social well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities. The [Social Workers Act \(2010\)](#) defines social work as:

The assessment, remediation and prevention of psycho-social problems and the enhancement of the social, psycho-social functioning and well being of individuals, families, groups and communities by using social work knowledge, theory and skills to

- I. provide direct counselling and therapy services to a client,
- II. develop, implement, manage or deliver human service programs, including those done in collaboration with other professions,
- III. contribute to the development and advancement of health and social policy, and
- IV. conduct research in the science, technique and practice of social work.

As this definition highlights, health and social policy is captured within the scope of social work practice. Social workers engage in health and social policy through direct practice, research and education, policy development, client advocacy and systemic advocacy.

The purpose of this document is to highlight how social workers can contribute to the development and enhancement of health and social policy through professional advocacy, emphasize the importance of the social determinants of health, and explore some of the ethical considerations. Examples of how to become involved in health and social policy advocacy is also included.

## ADVOCACY AND HEALTH AND SOCIAL POLICY

The Social Work Dictionary (2014) defines advocacy in social work practice as “championing the rights of individuals or communities through direct intervention or through empowerment” (p. 10). Social workers engage in health and social policy advocacy in many different ways including client specific advocacy, general policy advocacy to enhance services and programs, and advocacy for social change at the broader level. Advocacy to inform the development and enhancement of health and social policies can happen within and outside of the workplace.

## SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Social work practice is grounded in the “person in environment” perspective that seeks to understand the impact of external factors or conditions on the health and well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities. These conditions, referred to as the social determinants of health, include, but are not limited to, socioeconomic status, education, employment, housing, positive early life experiences, access to social supports, and food security. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2008) describes these determinants as the circumstances in which people are raised, live, experience, grow and age.

The Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) [Social Determinants of Health Policy Framework](#) highlights the importance of the social determinants of health and areas where the social work profession can have an impact on policy directions (i.e., policies to address poverty, inadequate wages, food insecurity, safe and affordable housing, and social inclusion). This is a great resource social workers can use to articulate policy recommendations and engage in health and social policy advocacy that can be shared with clients, employers, community stakeholders and government.

## **ETHICAL FRAMEWORK**

Social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) carry out their work with integrity, competence, and in the best interest of clients. Social workers adhere to the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) [Code of Ethics](#), CASW (2005) [Guidelines for Ethical Practice](#), and the NLCSW (2020) [Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL](#).

When engaging in health and social policy advocacy, social workers uphold the following ethical and professional responsibilities.

### **CASW (2005) Code of Ethics (Value 4: Pursuit of Social Justice)**

- Social workers uphold the right of people to have access to resources to meet basic human needs (p. 5).
- Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits (p. 5).

### **CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice (Ethical Responsibilities to Society)**

8.1.1 Social workers identify and interpret the basis and nature of individual, group, community, national and international social problems with the intention of bringing about greater understanding and insight for policy makers and the public (p. 24).

8.2.2 Social workers endeavor to engage in social and/or political action that seeks to ensure that all people have fair access to the resources, services and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully (p. 24).

8.2.3 Social workers are aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and strive to advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice (p. 24).

8.2.4 Social workers endeavor to expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed and exploited people and groups (p. 24).

8.2.5 Social workers strive to promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within Canada and globally. Social workers promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for

programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people (p. 25).

8.3.1 Social workers strive to facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions (p. 25).

### **NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice (Advocacy and Social Policy)**

- Social workers make reasonable efforts to advocate for policies and programs that support the health and well-being of clients and are informed by the social determinants of health (p. 16).
- Social workers demonstrate respect, honesty, integrity and professionalism in their advocacy efforts to promote social justice (p. 16).
- Social workers ensure that the standard pertaining to client confidentiality is upheld when engaging in advocacy (p. 17).

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Client Confidentiality**

Social workers have a responsibility to ensure that the value of client confidentiality is upheld in their work, including activities to promote social justice. The following standards from the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice are important:

- Social workers ensure the confidentiality of client information obtained through the social work relationship (p. 7).
- Social workers disclose client information to others with documented informed consent from the client (p. 7).
- Social workers ensure that the standard pertaining to client confidentiality is upheld when engaging in advocacy (p. 17).

It is important to note that the sharing of client information, even if the client's name is not used, may identify a client and result in a breach of client confidentiality. Therefore, social workers ensure that any discourse pertaining to a client is only done with the informed consent of the client. Social workers also share with clients the benefits and risks of the disclosure of client information.

### **Respect for Client's Right to Self-Determination**

Empowerment is an important element in client advocacy. As part of the empowerment process, social workers can assist clients in accessing resources and developing skills needed to become their own advocates. This is in keeping with the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice which states "Social workers promote the self-determination and autonomy of clients, actively encouraging them to make informed decisions on their own behalf" (p. 4).

## Ethical Responsibilities to the Workplace

Advocacy is a core component of social work practice. However, the relationship between advocacy and the environments in which social workers practice is an important consideration. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to their clients and employing agencies. As noted in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice:

4.1.1 Social workers acknowledge and strive to carry out the stated aims and objectives of their employing organization, agency, or service contractor, consistent with the requirements of ethical practice (p. 16).

4.1.3 Social workers use the organization's resources honestly and only for their intended purpose (p. 16).

4.1.4 Social workers appropriately challenge and work to improve policies, procedures, practices and service provisions that

- are not in the best interest of clients;
- are inequitable;
- are in any way oppressive, disempowering or culturally inappropriate; and
- demonstrate discrimination (p.16)

In light of the ethical responsibilities social workers have to their workplaces, it is important for social workers to distinguish between issues related to workplace and advocacy around social justice issues. There is a balance, and issues related to the workplace should be brought forward using appropriate organizational channels.

## E-professionalism

As noted in NLCSW's [Technology Use in Social Work Practice Explanatory Document](#) "Social workers using technology to advance social justice issues, engage in advocacy efforts, and/or participate in political action, adhere to the values and principles of the social work profession" (p. 14).

Social workers have ethical obligations to their clients, their employing organizations, and the profession. When engaging in social media or electronic communications to advance health and social policy, social workers give due attention to issues pertaining to integrity in professional practice and client confidentiality. Information posted to social networking sites is public, can be easily shared beyond the intended audience, and misinterpreted by those accessing it. Therefore, social workers engaging online must ensure they are adhering to their ethical and practice standards, consider the impact of information, opinions, or perspectives they are sharing, consider who is seeing the information and how it might be perceived, and are mindful of cultural sensitivities. Social workers are also accountable for addressing any misunderstandings in an appropriate and proactive manner.

## Professional Boundaries

Social workers have an ethical responsibility to maintain professional boundaries in social work practice. As noted in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice “Social workers maintain appropriate professional boundaries throughout the course of the professional relationship and after the professional relationship” (p. 11). When engaging in activities to advance health and social policies, social workers consider their ethical responsibilities pertaining to boundaries. NLCSW’s Practice Matters publication [Social Justice Through an Ethical Framework](#) is a great document to review. It explores some of the ethical dilemmas social workers may experience in their work and issues for consideration (e.g., how are professional boundaries being impacted, client perceptions, impact on the professional relationship, conflicts of interest).

When engaging in professional advocacy, social workers ensure that the client’s best interest is priority and any conflicts of interest that may arise are addressed. As noted in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice:

2.3 Social workers avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgement. Social workers inform clients when a real or potential conflict of interest arises and take reasonable steps to resolve the issue in a manner that makes the clients’ interests primary... (p. 11).

2.2.1 Social workers do not exploit professional relationships for personal benefit, gain or gratification (p. 11).

## Integrity in Professional Practice

Integrity in professional practice is a core value outlined in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics. Social workers “maintain a high level of professional conduct by acting honestly and responsibly, and promoting the values of the profession (CASW, 2005, Code of Ethics, p. 6). This includes when engaging in activities to advance health and social policy. Further, social workers carefully consider messages, alliances, and activities in keeping with one’s ethical and professional obligations. As noted in the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice, “social workers do not engage in activities or behaviors that diminish public trust in social workers or the social work profession” and “social workers do not discriminate against any person due to culture, religion, social economic status, gender, age, sexual orientation or disability” (p. 17).

## GETTING INVOLVED

Social workers ensure that their ethical and professional responsibilities are upheld when engaging in activities to advance health and social policies in the best interests of clients, communities, and the population as a whole. This includes, but not limited to:

- Taking part in public consultations on social justice initiatives (e.g., poverty reduction, economic well-being, seniors isolation, health care delivery).
- Availing of opportunities to inform legislative changes.

- Engaging in community initiatives or volunteering with local coalitions or organizations with an interest in a mutual issue or concern.
- Participating in organizational opportunities to discuss policy development, providing input into the direction of programming, or sitting on a steering committee.
- Engaging colleagues in a discussion to identify collective solutions that can be brought forward.
- Educating colleagues, stakeholders, and clients where appropriate on important health and social policy issues.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social workers across diverse fields of practice contribute to the development and advancement of health and social policy. Professional advocacy is one area. In keeping with their ethical responsibilities, social workers adhere to the ethics, values, and standards of the social work profession, demonstrate respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons, promote professionalism and enhance confidence in the social work profession, ensure the best interest of clients is a central focus, and advocate for inclusive, equitable and culturally responsive services, programs, and public policies. This document is intended as a guide for social workers to use in their work to enhance the health and well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities.



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