

Ethical Compass



Ethical Compass is an initiative of the NLCSW 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 NLCSW ethical consultation process and from a review of ethical trends in practice.

Social Justice in the Public Domain

Social justice is a core value in the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics, and social workers advocate in the best interests of clients at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. However, ethical issues can also arise in advocacy work, and it is important for social workers to take the time to engage in critical reflection and discussion on these issues. Regardless of one's area of practice, it is important that social workers understand their ethical responsibilities and promote professionalism in their advocacy work. This edition of Ethical Compass will explore social justice in the public domain from an ethical lens and highlight areas for consideration.

Practice Scenarios: 1) A social worker concerned about the rising cost of living contemplates calling into a local radio show to air frustrations on how this impacts clients. 2) A social worker who does not agree with the provision of MAID to those with a mental illness starts an online Facebook group to collect signatures to oppose any changes that would allow this to happen in legislation. 3) A social worker shares a good news story on a personal social media platform about their advocacy work with a client.

Reflection Questions:

1. Is there conflict between one's personal and professional values?
2. Could these actions create a conflict of interest or blur professional boundaries?
3. How might this impact client confidentiality and privacy?
4. Could this have an impact on current or future clients?
5. How would these actions be viewed by one's colleagues/employer?
6. What other options exist?

In reflecting on these practice scenarios and questions, a review of the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice and the Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2020) Standards of Practice is important.

CASW (2005) Code of Ethics

Value 1: Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

- Social workers uphold each person’s right to self-determination, consistent with that person’s capacity and with the rights of others (p.4).

Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice

- Social workers advocate for fair and equitable access to public services and benefits (p.5).

Value 3: Service to Humanity

- Social workers place the needs of others above self-interest when acting in a professional capacity (p. 6).

CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice:

- Social workers maintain the best interest of clients as a priority, with due regard to the respective interests of others” (p. 3).
- Once information is shared or observed in a professional context, standards of confidentiality apply. (p. 6).

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).

In addition to consulting with a manager or supervisor, social workers should review NLCSW’s (2022) [Health & Social Policy Advocacy Guideline Document for Social Workers](https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Health_Social_Policy_Advocacy_Guideline_Document_for_Social_Workers.pdf) which addresses client confidentiality and self-determination, workplace ethics, e-professionalism, professional boundaries, and integrity in professional practice. The NLCSW’s Practice Matters publication, [Social Justice Through an Ethical Framework](https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Social%20Justice%20Through%20An%20Ethical%20Framework.pdf), is also helpful in this context. When considering engaging online to advance or promote social justice initiatives, it is important that social workers reflect on the values, ethics, and standards of the profession to ensure that their decision-making is grounded in an ethical framework and that the commitment to professional practice is upheld.

References:

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