

Newfoundland & Labrador  
**College of  
Social Workers**

**Resolving Workplace Issues Through an Ethical Framework**

**Guideline Document for Social Workers**

**March 2024**

# Resolving Workplace Issues Through an Ethical Framework

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## INTRODUCTION

The Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) regulates the practice of social work in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) under provincial legislation titled the [Social Workers Act](#), SNL 2010, c.S-17.2. Through its mandate, the NLCSW advances and promotes ethical and professional social work practice in the public interest.

As a regulated profession, social workers have a responsibility to be aware of and adhere to the [Social Workers Act](#) (2010), Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2024) [Code of Ethics, Values and Guiding Principles](#) and NLCSW (2024) [Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL](#).

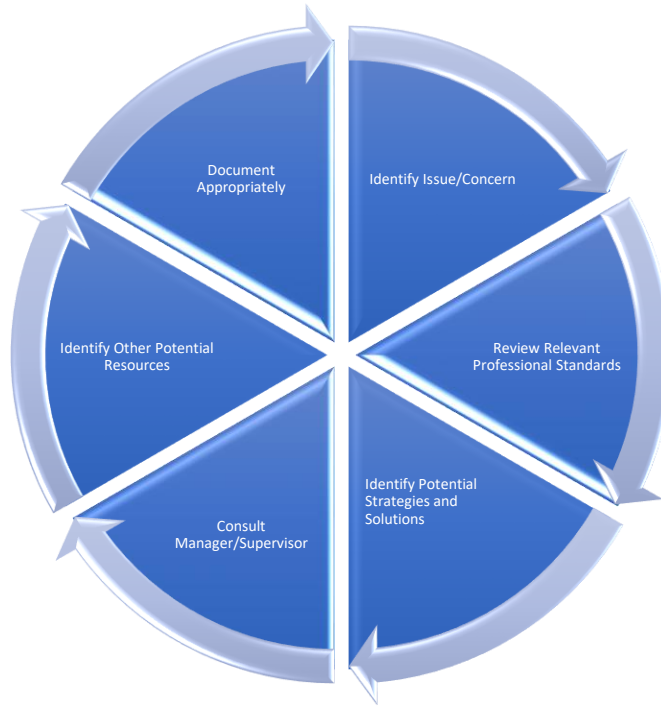
There may be times when social workers are compelled to address issues or situations in the workplace that negatively impact, or has the potential to impact, service delivery. In these situations, social workers may be concerned about their ability to maintain their ethical and professional responsibilities in keeping with the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

The purpose of this document is to provide a framework for social workers when resolving workplace issues in keeping with one's professional and ethical responsibilities.

For clarity:

- If the issue pertains to concerns about the professional practice of a colleague, social workers consult NLCSW's [Guiding Framework for Social Workers Concerned about the Professional Practice of a Colleague](#) and follow the steps that are outlined in the document.
- Social workers navigating an ethical dilemma in social work practice consult NLCSW's [Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work Practice](#) and follow the steps outlined in the document.

## FRAMEWORK



## FRAMEWORK (ELABORATED)

### Identify Issue/Concern

It is important to clearly identify the nature of the issue or concern. Workplace issues impacting on practice may include, but are not limited to, conflict in the work environment, occupational health and safety concerns, workload issues, human resource planning, and disagreements on policy.

Once the issue is identified, it is important to assess whether this impacts on service delivery or client care, or on one's ability to adhere to their professional standards of practice.

### Review Relevant Professional Standards

Social workers are employed in diverse areas of practice and strive to carry out the aims and objectives of their employment organization, consistent with ethical practice. The NLCSW (2024) [Standards of Practice](#) outline social workers' ethical responsibilities to the workplace that are related to professional practice.

- Social workers work towards the best possible standards of service and are accountable for their practice (p. 11).
- Social workers appropriately challenge and work to improve policies, practices or services that are not in the best interests of clients, are inequitable, or discriminatory (p. 11).
- When policies or procedures of organization contravene or conflict with social work ethics and standards, social workers endeavor to affect change through consultation using established organizational channels and offer alternative options where appropriate (p. 11).
- Social workers in disagreement with direction provided by an employer/supervisor will document the discussion and outcome in the appropriate manner (e.g., administrative files) (p. 11).
- Social workers take steps to ensure that employers are aware of their professional and ethical responsibilities and obligations (p. 11).
- Social workers demonstrate respect, integrity and courtesy when relating to social work colleagues and colleagues from other professions (p. 10).
- Social workers share their knowledge and expertise and communicate effectively with colleagues to promote the best interests of clients (p. 10).
- Social workers promote and advocate for high quality professional practice environments (p. 21).

In addition to a review of one's professional responsibilities, it is important to review organizational policies that pertain to the issue.

### **Identify Potential Strategies/Solutions**

Once the issue has been clearly identified and the standards/policies have been reviewed, it is important to identify potential strategies, solutions, and next steps in addressing the issue. While an immediate or 'quick fix' solution may not be available, having a beginning place to start the dialogue with the appropriate people within the organization is helpful. Engaging

one's colleagues in the discussion of strategies and steps is also recommended where appropriate.

### **Consult with Manager/Supervisor**

Engaging with one's manager or supervisor is a crucial step in addressing workplace issues in practice. Informing the manager/supervisor about the issue or concern ensures that the organization is aware of the issue that may be impacting service delivery, and can complete a risk assessment to identify steps for addressing the issue. Articulating one's professional and ethical responsibilities, as part of this consultation, is important.

### **Identify Other Potential Resources**

When trying to address workplace issues, it is important to think about other key resources that can be helpful to move the discussion in order to resolve the issue. This may include resources within the organization such as workplace colleagues, professional practice, quality and risk, or Employee Assistance Programs. It may also include outside resources such as one's union where appropriate.

### **Document Appropriately**

When addressing workplace issues in practice, it is important to document one's concerns and decision-making using appropriate organizational channels. As noted in the NLCSW's (2022) [Recording in Social Work Explanatory Document](#), issues pertaining to workload challenges and disagreements amongst organizational staff, managers or administrators should not be included in a client file. If unsure of where to document, social workers should seek organizational guidance.

## **SUMMARY**

Social workers have an ethical responsibility to identify workplace issues that may impact service delivery, identify potential solutions and strategies for mitigating these issues and engage in collaborative dialogue and decision-making. Change-management can be challenging, but taking the time to raise awareness of these issues can enhance service delivery and make for more a more positive and enriching workplace environment.

## REFERENCES

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