

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.

Rural Social Work Practice & Professional Boundaries

As one of the largest health professions in Newfoundland and Labrador, social workers practice in diverse areas of practice in urban settings as well as remote, rural communities. Navigating professional boundaries in social work practice can be fraught with complexities. There is often a balance to be negotiated between personal and professional interests. Consider the following examples:

Practice Scenarios: 1) Kate RSW practices and lives in a small rural community. During a recent intake session, Kate discovers that a new client is the mother of one of her daughter's friends. Kate is the only mental health practitioner in the community and wonders about the ethics of this situation. 2) Darrin, age 15, is accessing social work services from Kelly RSW. Darrin lives in a remote community and Kelly is a rotational worker. Darrin is anxious about engaging in counselling and how information he shares with Kelly will be disclosed to his parents. How can Kelly address these issues with Darrin?

Ethical Considerations

As part of the ethical decision-making process these social workers would review the [CASW Code of Ethics, Values and Guiding Principles \(2024\)](#) and the [NLCSW Standards of Practice \(2024\)](#) and consider the following:

- Social workers place the well-being and interests of all people at the centre of their relationships (CASW, p.15).
- Social workers continually develop self-awareness and practice self-reflection to guide their practice and personal well-being (CASW, p.15).
- Social Workers maintain appropriate professional boundaries with service users (CASW, p.16).
- Social workers are aware of potential conflicts of interest and avoid situations where their personal interests may interfere with their professional obligations (CASW, p.17).

- Social workers uphold the interests of service users, members of the public, and other professionals in developing and safeguarding the trust placed in the confidential relationship (CASW, p.19).
- Social workers ensure that the confidentiality of client information is maintained through the social work relationship (NLCSW, p.8).
- Social workers respect the privacy of clients and only seek client information that is relevant to the service delivery (NLCSW, p.9).
- Social workers ascertain and consider the manner in which individual clients wish confidentiality to apply within their cultural context (NLCSW, p.9).
- When working with minors: social workers need to be aware of their legal and ethical responsibilities as they relate to consent, treatment and service delivery and clarify the limits of confidentiality with the client and their parent, guardian, or legal representative. Social workers may need to determine when disclosure is in the best interest of the child. This should be declared prior to the first session with the child (NLCSW, p.9).
- Where dual or multiple relationships exist, social workers are responsible for ensuring that appropriate boundaries are established and maintained, and that the social worker-client relationship is safeguarded (NLCSW, p.14).

Reflection Questions:

- What is the degree of personal relationship with the client?
- Is there potential for unanticipated boundary crossings and complexities?
- Are you able to provide objective and non-biased services? Can you separate what you know professionally from what you think you know personally?
- Is the client aware of the boundary dilemma?
- How might client privacy and confidentiality be impacted?
- Are there cultural elements that need to be considered?
- Would terminating the social work service be in the best interest of the client? If so, what alternative options exist for service delivery? If you continue to provide services, how will you maintain effective boundaries?
- Have you consulted with your supervisor/ manager?

Social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador work in various settings where they may have connections with clients outside of service provision. Critical reflection involves the analysis of risks and benefits as well as consideration of context of practice and cultural issues. Best interest of the client, informed consent, client privacy and confidentiality, and potential conflicts of interest are all important professional and ethical considerations. 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:

- CASW. (2024). Canadian Association of Social Workers *Code of ethics, values and guiding principles*. <https://nlcsw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/CASW-code-of-ethics-values-guiding-principles.pdf>
- Gough, J., & Massing, D. (2019). *Social work ethics: progressive, practical, and relational approaches* (E. Spencer, Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- NLCSW (2021). Ethical decision-making in social work practice. <https://nlcsw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ethical-decision-making-in-social-work-practice.pdf>
- NLCSW. (2024). *Standards of practice for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador*. <https://nlcsw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/standards-of-practice-for-social-workers-in-nl.pdf>