

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.

'Being your Best Professional Self'

Barker (2014) defines professionalism as “the degree to which an individual possesses and uses the knowledge, skills and qualifications of a profession and adheres to its values and ethics when serving the client” (p. 338). This edition of the Ethical Compass will explore professionalism within the framework of the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador with a focus on competence, ethical decision-making, dual and multiple relationships, conflicts of interest and impairment.

Competence: “Social workers demonstrate commitment to maintaining and enhancing their knowledge, skills and expertise and engage in continuing professional education” (NLASW Standards of Practice, p.4). In providing clients with the highest quality services, social workers keep abreast of current, new and emerging theories, therapeutic interventions and models of service delivery. It is this passion for life-long learning that keeps us grounded and motivated.

Ethical Decision-Making: “Ethical decision-making is integral to social work practice” (NLASW Standards of Practice, p. 11). The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics unites the social work profession and is a great tool for social workers to use in navigating complex ethical decisions in practice. It is good practice to keep the Code of Ethics handy and to consult it regularly. NLASW also has an ethical decision-making resource guide that social workers can use in practice.

Dual and Multiple Relationships: “Social workers establish and maintain appropriate professional boundaries with the client’s interest being paramount” (NLASW Standards of Practice, p. 11). Given the geographical realities of NL, dual and multiple relationships often exist. Therefore, social workers are responsible for establishing appropriate boundaries, addressing potential or perceived conflicts of interest, and discussing this with clients as part of the informed consent process. For example, thinking about how one would address a client in public is an important part of the informed consent process.

NLASW has discussed the issue of dual and multiple relationships in a previous edition of the Ethical Compass.

Conflicts of Interest: “Social workers are aware that decision-making may be impacted due to relationships with other clients, colleagues, or third parties, and one’s own values and beliefs and seek appropriate consultation” (NLASW Standards of Practice, p. 12). Conflicts of interest can be complex and uncomfortable for the social worker and the client. Therefore, it is important to be proactive and address conflicts of interest that arise in practice. NLASW has discussed conflicts of interest in social work practice in several Practice Matters publications.

Impairment: “Social workers are responsible for ensuring their own fitness to practice and addressing impairments that may affect their ability to practice competently (psychological, emotional, cognitive, and/or physical factors)” (NLASW Standards of Practice, p. 4). Stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and trauma can impact social workers. Therefore, it is important that social workers engage in self-care and consult with one’s colleagues, managers, and/or supervisors in addressing any issues that impact their work with clients. NLASW produced a Practice Matters publication on this topic.

This edition of the Ethical Compass explored professionalism and focused on several standards from the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to be aware of and adhere to the Standards of Practice and the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice. Being your best professional self is a continuing journey and these documents must be an integral part of that journey. Whether you are just starting your journey as a new social worker or are a seasoned professional, the following are helpful strategies for being your best professional self:

- Take part in professional education opportunities that allow you to advance your knowledge, skills and competencies
- Always be cognizant of your ethical responsibilities
- Maintain personal and professional boundaries
- Address conflicts of interest as they arise in practice
- Engage in self-care

References:

Barker, R. (2014). *The social work dictionary*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

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.

NLASW. *Ethical Compass Series*. <https://nlasw.ca/practice-resources/ethical-compass>

NLASW. *Practice Matters Series*. <https://nlasw.ca/practice-resources/practice-matters>