

Newfoundland & Labrador Association of
Social Workers

**STANDARDS FOR TECHNOLOGY USE
IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

Adopted February 3, 2012

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INTRODUCTION

The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) is the regulatory body and professional association for social work in Newfoundland and Labrador. NLASW is responsible for regulating the practice of social work under provincial legislation titled the *Social Workers Act*, SNL 2010, c.S-17.2. The vision is *Excellence in Social Work*.

Technology has become an integral part of social work practice. *Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice* have been developed to guide social workers as they move forward in this 'digital age'. This document builds on the 2005 NLASW discussion paper *Confidentiality in the Age of Technology*.

The NLASW believes that it is important to engage members in the development of professional standards for the social work profession in Newfoundland and Labrador. In January 2011, the NLASW invited social workers with an interest in social work technology to become part of an ad-hoc committee to inform the development of *Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice*. In March 2011, members were invited to complete a short needs assessment to identify issues related to the use of technology in social work practice, including risks and benefits. A thorough literature review was also completed. In October 2011, members were invited to review and provide feedback on the draft standards. The NLASW Board of Directors adopted the final document on February 3, 2012.

The purpose of these standards is to:

- a) Support social workers in their use of technology in social work practice,
- b) Highlight awareness of the practice considerations and ethical responsibilities when using technology in practice, and
- c) Inform social workers, employers and the public on best practice standards for social work.

STANDARDS FOR TECHNOLOGY USE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Standard 1: Technology use in social work practice is grounded in the values, ethics and principles of the social work profession.

Standard 2: Social workers ensure proficiency in the use of technology in the workplace and practice within their competency, while continuing to enhance their knowledge, skills and abilities.

Standard 3: As part of the informed consent process, social workers inform clients about technologies that are being used in the delivery of social work services, including the inherent risks and opportunities.

Standard 4: Social workers document all electronic communications in keeping with agency/organizational policies, ethical standards, and best practice guidelines.

Standard 5: Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of inter-jurisdictional issues when providing therapy or social work services using electronic technologies (i.e., on-line counselling, on-line support groups, video conferencing etc).

Standard 6: Social workers who use technological approaches to conduct social work research or to gather information/research to inform practice do so in a manner that ensures ethical credibility.

Standard 7: Social workers consider issues relating to conflicts of interest, dual and multiple relationships and boundaries as it pertains to the use of technology in practice.

Standard 8: 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.

DEFINITIONS

Social Work

According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2000):

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

The *Social Workers Act 2010* of Newfoundland and Labrador defines social work as:

the assessment, remediation and prevention of psycho-social problems and the enhancement of the social, psycho-social functioning of individuals, families, groups and communities by

- (i) providing direct counselling and therapy services to clients,
- (ii) developing, promoting and delivering human service programs, including those done in association with other professions,
- (iii) contributing to the development and improvement of social policy, and
- (iv) conducting research in the science, technique and practice of social work.

Social Worker

In order to refer to oneself as a social worker or to practice within the scope of practice of the social work profession in Newfoundland and Labrador, an individual must meet the criteria for registration as outlined under the *Social Workers Act 2010*. Registered social workers are granted the RSW designation. Use of the RSW designation affirms that the individual has met the criteria for registration and has been granted use of the title and right to practice social work in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Clients

Clients include a “person, family, group of persons, incorporated body, association or community on whose behalf a social worker provides or agrees to provide a service or to whom the social worker is legally obligated to provide service” (CASW, 2005a, p. 10). The word, “client,” acknowledges the power differential that exists between giver and receiver of service.

RATIONALE

Increasingly, social workers use technology to provide social work interventions, document client service delivery, communicate with clients, colleagues and organizations, send and receive faxes, conduct research on theories, techniques and interventions, and access community resources. On-line counselling (or e-therapy) and social media are also being used more frequently in social work practice.

Technology use will continue to grow and expand in social work practice, and with this use comes unique opportunities and challenges. It is therefore necessary that social workers have the skills, knowledge and expertise to incorporate technology into ethical practice.

While organizations have policies in place for technology use, these standards have been developed to highlight some of the ethical, best practice, and professional issues that need to be considered in social work practice.

For the purpose of this document technology refers to any mode of electronic communication used in the delivery of social work services (examples include but are not limited to e-mail, text messages, electronic records, social media, e-therapy, on-line support groups, and telehealth).

STANDARDS FOR TECHNOLOGY USE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE (ELABORATED)

These standards are informed by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (2005), the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice (2005), the New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) Standards for the Use of Technology in Social Work Practice (2010), and relevant social work and professional literature.

Standard 1: Technology use in social work practice is grounded in the values, ethics and principles of the social work profession.

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) outlines the values and principles that guide professional social work practice. These values include:

- 1) Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons
- 2) Pursuit of Social Justice
- 3) Service to Humanity
- 4) Integrity in Professional Practice

- 5) Confidentiality in Professional Practice
- 6) Competence in Professional Practice

Technology use in social work practice will continue to evolve. Therefore, it is important that social workers continue to explore how technology impacts on their professional practice including clinical, administrative, community practice, social policy and education.

Some of the professional practice issues that social workers will need to address include privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, and dual and multiple relationships. A reflection on each of the values outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) is important in resolving ethical conflicts that relate to technology in social work practice.

Standard 2: Social workers ensure proficiency in the use of technology in the workplace and practice within their competency, while continuing to enhance their knowledge, skills and abilities.

According to the NASW/ASWB Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice (2005), social workers need to become “proficient in the technological skills and tools required for competent and ethical practice and for seeking appropriate training and consultation to stay current with emerging technologies” (p. 7). These skills are necessary in all areas of social work practice.

Generally, organizations and employers have established policies and may provide training and education to guide social workers’ use of technologies in practice that are required by the organization (i.e., electronic documentation, video-conferencing, use of wireless technologies, etc). Where this training is lacking or underdeveloped, social workers advocate for educational training and resources.

Social workers who use electronic mediums in the provision of clinical services (i.e., on-line therapy, on-line support groups) should only do so once they have the necessary education, skill and competency in the technology and the practice. As outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005): “social workers demonstrate due care for client’s interests and safety by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence” (p.8). It is therefore important that social workers engage in continuing education opportunities to increase their skills, knowledge and competencies in the use of technology, and seek consultation and supervision. This is in keeping with Value 6: *Competence in Professional Practice*, of the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) which states: “social workers strive to maintain and increase their professional knowledge and skill” (p.8).

Clearly, technology use in social work practice can enhance service delivery; yet at the same time social workers need to be cognizant of the limitations and ethical challenges that technology can bring. Social workers using technology in practice need to continuously evaluate and assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of technology mediums and only use technologies that are in the best interests of clients and are in keeping with culturally sensitive practice.

Social workers are seeing an increase in the number of clients and client systems who use technology in their personal and professional lives. It is therefore important that social workers continue to strive to have an understanding of the impact of technology on clients, organizations and communities. Issues such as cultural considerations, accessibility, and community practices need to be taken into consideration, in addition to clinical issues such as on-line bullying.

Technology is also being used more by supervisors and educators. It is therefore important that social workers providing supervision to colleagues or students encourage and facilitate discussions on the use of technology in social work practice. These discussions will assist with evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of the technology being used and raising awareness of the professional and ethical issues that need to be considered.

Standard 3: As part of the informed consent process, social workers inform clients about technologies that are being used in the delivery of social work services, including the inherent risks and opportunities.

Informed consent is defined as a “voluntary agreement reached by a capable client based on information about foreseeable risks and benefits associated with the agreement (e.g., participation in counselling or agreement to disclose social work report to a third party)” (CASW, 2005a, p. 10).

When social workers incorporate the use of technology in their practice, it is important that clients are informed about what technology is being used, the policies that guide the technological use, and any benefits and limitations. Some of the specific issues that may need to be addressed include privacy and confidentiality and risk management strategies. This information should be documented in the client file.

In using technology in practice, social workers adhere to privacy and confidentiality best practice standards and relevant legislation including the *Personal Health Information Act* and the *Privacy Act* when applicable. Social workers ensure that clients, groups, and organizations

are aware of the privacy and confidentiality concerns with the use of technology in practice and inform policies to address these issues. As outlined in the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005): “social workers take precautions to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information transmitted to other parties through the use of computers, electronic mail, facsimile machines, telephone answering machines and other electronic technology. Social workers inform clients of the limits to confidentiality that may apply to these forms of communication” (p. 7). In addition to informing clients of the limits to confidentiality, social workers incorporate risk management strategies and inform clients of precautions that are being taken to minimize potential breaches such as encrypted e-mails, firewalls, and passwords.

As in all social worker/client relationships, it is important that clients are aware of how and when social work services delivered through technology will be terminated. This is particularly important for social workers who receive e-mails and/or texts from clients during the relationship to ensure that clear boundaries are maintained throughout the duration of the relationship and after the social work intervention ends.

Standard 4: Social workers document all electronic communications in keeping with agency/organizational policies, ethical standards, and best practice guidelines.

Documentation of client assessment and social work intervention/service delivery is an essential part of social work practice. The purpose of social work recording, as outlined in the NLASW Standards for Recording (2005), is to provide:

- Accountability to the client, the organization and relevant legislation
- Evidence of facts gathered, assessment, intervention and outcome
- On-going essential information
- A clear statement of social work involvement on an on-going basis
- Relevant information for future social work involvement and continuity of care
- Information about the role of social work in an interdisciplinary team
- Documentation for the purposes of research and program evaluation

As with all social work documentation, social workers adhere to agency/organizational policies, ethical standards and best practice guidelines where client information is gathered via electronic communication. It is also the expectation that social workers advocate for policies that are in the best interests of clients. When electronic communication is used to connect with clients, social workers should have clear policies in place around response times and how this information is documented.

The following are some areas that social workers need to be aware of when it comes to documentation and electronic communication.

- E-mail, phone and text messages from clients: According to Zur (2010), phone messages, text messages and e-mails that “have clinical or other significance” should be considered part of the clinical record. Social workers must use clinical judgment in assessing whether information received from electronic technologies has clinical significance and to record all necessary and relevant information.
- Informed consent and transparency: When electronic modes of communication are used in practice, it is important that social workers include policies around documentation of electronic communications within the informed consent process. It is important that clients have a clear understanding of how this information is being recorded; allowing them to make decision about what information is communicated electronically.
- Record keeping: As outlined in the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005): “social workers protect the confidentiality of clients’ written and electronic records. Social workers take reasonable steps to ensure that clients’ records are stored in a secure location and that clients’ records are not available to others who are not authorized to have access” (p. 8). When using electronic forms of documentation or information collection (i.e., laptops), it is important that social workers develop risk management strategies (i.e., computer passwords, back-up files).
- Crisis Situations: When social workers communicate with clients via e-mail/text, it is important that social workers develop policies on how crisis situations reported through e-mail/text will be handled and to inform clients about these policies within the informed consent process and on-going throughout the relationship as necessary. It is helpful for professionals to discuss with clients the type of information appropriate for e-mail/text in keeping with agency policies, the Code of Ethics and best practice guidelines. This information should be clearly documented in the client file.

As outlined by Reamer (2006), it is also important that social workers using technology in the provision of social work services help clients to identify local emergency services, supports and resources that clients may access outside the social worker/client relationship.

Standard 5: Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of inter-jurisdictional issues when providing therapy or social work services using electronic technologies (i.e., on-line counselling, on-line support groups, video conferencing etc).

It is important that social workers have an understanding of any regulatory requirements before providing services to clients outside of the province/country in which the social worker resides. It is the responsibility of the social worker to consult with the social work regulatory bodies in the jurisdictions of the client and social worker.

Standard 6: Social workers who use technological approaches to conduct social work research or to gather information/research to inform practice do so in a manner that ensures ethical credibility.

Research conducted through technological approaches shall adhere to the values and ethics of the social work profession. The CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) outlines the ethical responsibilities of social workers engaged in research, including:

6.1.1 Social workers educate themselves, their students and their colleagues about responsible research practices.

6.3 Social workers obtain informed consent to take part in research from either participants or their legally authorized representatives.

6.3.2 Social workers ensure confidentiality of research participants' identity and discuss them only in limited circumstances for professional purposes.

6.3.4 Social workers store research material securely and for the required period as indicated by relevant research ethics guidelines.

Social workers practice diligently when accessing internet based resources or published research to support service delivery. It is important that when internet based resources are researched, social workers validate the credibility of the resource before incorporating it into practice or referring clients to the internet site.

The NASW/ASWB (2005) outlines some steps that social workers can take when considering research from on-line resources.

- 1) Establish and verify authorship
- 2) Verify the credentials and competencies of the researchers
- 3) Explore the validity and limitation of the research
- 4) Consider the accuracy of the reported findings or results

Standard 7: Social workers consider issues relating to conflicts of interest, dual and multiple relationships and boundaries as it pertains to the use of technology in practice.

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) and social work literature speak to the importance of social workers setting appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries with clients and former clients. While the introduction of technology can sometimes challenge these boundaries, it is the responsibility of the social worker to establish and maintain boundaries that are in the best interest of the client and avoid real or potential conflicts of interest.

The use of social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, blogs, etc) has grown significantly over the past few years, and millions of people world-wide are connecting through this medium. Professional social media sites (e.g., LinkedIn) are also being used by professionals, including social workers at a growing number. It is therefore important that social workers be aware of the ethical considerations pertaining to the use of social media and the interplay between the professional and personal. The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics outlines several ethical considerations, specifically as it relates to Values 4 and 5, that need to be considered within the context of social media use.

- *Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice* speaks to the issue of professional boundaries, dual and multiple relationships and conflicts of interest in social work practice.

It is the responsibility of the social worker to establish appropriate boundaries with clients/former clients and to be open and transparent about real or potential conflicts of interest. As noted in the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) “social workers avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgement” (p.11). These ethical considerations need to be explored in situations that arise in practice that pertain to social media (i.e., responding to a client/former client/student friend request on facebook, googling a client/former client/student/potential employee, etc).

Within the context of boundaries, practitioner self-disclosure is another area that warrants consideration. According to Lehavot (2008) as stated in Barnett (n.d), the “internet redefines the process of self-disclosure”. Therefore, social workers need to be cognizant of what personal information can be accessed about them on-line, how this disclosure will impact their professional role, and to develop risk management strategies.

Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice highlights the importance of a client's right to confidentiality. Confidential information is only disclosed with the informed consent of the client or when required by law or court order.

The following excerpt from the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) is important when exploring the issue of client confidentiality within the context of social media.

Social workers respect client's right to privacy. Social workers do not solicit private information from clients unless it is required to provide services or to conduct social work research. Once information is shared or observed in the professional context, standards of confidentiality apply. Social workers protect clients' identity and only disclose confidential information to other parties (including family members) with the informed consent of clients or the clients legally authorized representatives, or when required by law or court order. This obligation continues indefinitely after the social worker has ceased contact with the client (p. 6).

Zur (2010) highlights the need for professionals to be more attuned to issues of privacy when using social media sites because of their interactive form. Kolmes (2009) notes that even if client information is posted without disclosing a person's name, age or ethnicity, given the nature of the public forum, this may not be enough to protect privacy and confidentiality.

Standard 8: 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.

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) speaks to the professional value of social justice (Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice). As a profession, social workers have an ethical responsibility to promote social justice and advocate for policies, programs and resources to meet the health and well-being of all individuals. Social workers embrace and promote the principles of fairness, inclusion, respect, equality and equity. When social workers use technology to advance social justice issues, a reflection on the values and principles of the profession as outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) is important. Social workers need to give due attention to issues of client confidentiality and integrity in practice.

CONCLUSION

The NLASW *Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice* provide best practice standards for technology use in social work practice in Newfoundland and Labrador. The standards are intended to provide guidance and support to social workers in diverse fields of practice and to raise awareness of the practice considerations and ethical responsibilities of using technology in practice. The ultimate goal is excellence in social work practice.

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