

COVID-19 & Social Work Practice - Frequently Asked Questions

This resource has been developed in response to member inquiries. It is a living document and will be updated as needed.

1). I have been approached to provide electronic social work services privately to clients during the COVID-19 pandemic? Am I able to do this? What steps should I take?

As of March 24th, the Chief Medical Officer of Health for the province has ordered the closure of all private practice health care clinics including social work private practice. Only urgent or virtual care can be provided until further notice.

The private practice of social work is an area of specialization that has been identified by the profession. Private practice is not an entry level social work position. NLASW's Private Practice Policy was developed based on best practice guidelines. As per the policy, the criteria for voluntary registration as a private practitioner requires that social workers have an MSW with three or more years of social work experience in the proposed areas of private practice. Social workers practicing privately must be **actively registered as an RSW with the NLASW and have current professional liability insurance.**

Social workers with a BSW can however legally engage in private practice if they are actively registered as an RSW in the province and have current professional liability insurance. However, as per the NLASW Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL, "social workers engage in private practice with appropriate competence, experience, and expertise". One's area of expertise and training should be clearly communicated to the client as part of the informed consent process.

There are many issues that must be considered for those engaging in or thinking about starting a private practice, and the NLASW Private Practice Resource Guide is a great resource. You can access this document at [https://nlasw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Private Practice%20 Guidelines %28Revised May 2019%29.pdf](https://nlasw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Private%20Practice%20Guidelines%28Revised%20May%202019%29.pdf)

All information pertaining to the delivery of electronic services can be found on the NLASW website [https://nlasw.ca/electronic social work practice criteria for RSW in NL](https://nlasw.ca/electronic%20social%20work%20practice%20criteria%20for%20RSW%20in%20NL). If you are practicing electronically, it is important to ensure that your professional liability insurance policy provides adequate coverage for electronic practice. If your professional liability insurance is through CASW's insurance provider, BMS, electronic social work practice is covered.

2) I am a private practitioner and will be offering electronic social work services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. What should I be considering?

All information pertaining to the delivery of electronic services can be found on the NLASW website at [https://nlasw.ca/electronic social work practice criteria for RSW in NL](https://nlasw.ca/electronic-social-work-practice-criteria-for-RSW-in-NL).

If you are practicing electronically, it is important to ensure that your professional liability insurance policy provides adequate coverage for electronic practice. Social workers should also communicate with clients about what technologies they are planning to use, if the client has access to these technologies, plans for temporary suspension of services, and availability of community resources.

As with any service delivery, informed consent with clients is crucial. Therefore, social workers incorporating technology in their service delivery should incorporate this as part of their informed consent process. The NLASW has an informed consent and documentation self-assessment tool that social workers can use in developing an informed consent template or when integrating this into informed consent discussions with clients. This resource can be accessed on the NLASW website at <https://nlasw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Informed%20Consent%20%26%20Documentaton%20Reflection%20Tools.pdf>

3) I don't have time to research all the available technologies for the delivery of social work services, can the NLASW recommend one?

As you can appreciate, there are numerous technology programs available for service delivery (i.e., skype, zoom, telephone, google duo) and social workers may prefer one that works best for them and for their clientele. Therefore, the NLASW does not recommend, approve or limit the use of the various technological platforms. Each platform is unique and questions pertaining to client privacy and confidentiality must be considered when choosing the best platform to meet your needs. You might also find it helpful to consult with other social workers in private practice about any technologies they are using or find helpful. Engaging in communication with clients about what technologies they have access to would also be important.

4) How long do I need to keep my physical office closed?

The situation pertaining to COVID-19 evolves daily and the Chief Medical Officer of Health will update individuals and businesses when restrictions are lifted. Social workers are required to keep abreast of updates that pertain to their businesses and follow the directives accordingly.

5) Should I report if a client discloses to a me that they have been experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 and are choosing not to self-isolate, or if they have been informed to self-isolate and are choosing not to?

While COVID-19 is presenting new challenges to health care professionals in Newfoundland and Labrador, all health care professionals, which includes social workers, should be familiar with and adhere to the Act Respecting the Protection and Promotion of Health. The Act clearly outlines duty to report requirements for health care professionals that meet the criteria outlined in the Act and Orders of the Chief Medical Officer of the province. This legislation can be accessed on the Government of NL website at <https://www.assembly.nl.ca/Legislation/sr/statutes/p37-3.htm>.

When considering duty to report, the following sections from the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice are relevant:

CASW (2005) Code of Ethics: Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice notes: “Social workers only disclose confidential information to other parties (including family members) with the informed consent of clients, clients’ legally authorized representatives or when required by law or court order. The general expectation that social workers will keep information confidential does not apply when disclosure is necessary to prevent serious, foreseeable and imminent harm to a client or others”.

The NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice (Standard 6 - Confidentiality) notes: “Social workers may disclose client information to others without consent when:

- *disclosure is necessary to prevent serious, imminent and foreseeable harm to self or others
- *required by law or a court order
- *in all instances social workers disclose the least amount of confidential information to meet their obligations and protect confidential client information from unreasonable public exposure.

The NLASW has a wealth of resources on our website (www.nlasw.ca) to help social workers navigate ethical dilemmas in practice. It is recommended that social workers consult the relevant documents including the NLASW Ethical Decision-Making Resource Guide, CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL, along with organizational policies and relevant legislation.