

Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers
Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics,
as amended for NSASW

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At a Special Meeting of the Association

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Introduction

A code of ethics is the foundational document in social work practice, encompassing the values of our profession, articulating our central beliefs and creating the unique context for engaging in our work. It is aspirational, providing an ideal to strive for.

The *Social Workers Act* of Nova Scotia specifies that the Council of the Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers (NSASW) may make by-laws concerning “adopting the code of ethics of the Canadian Association of Social Workers and amending the code as it applies to members of the Association.” Section 42 of the NSASW by-laws states: “The Code of Ethics shall be the most recently revised Code of Ethics of the Canadian Association of Social Workers and any amendments added there to as approved by the Association.” It is important to consider what the CASW Code says about ethical practice:

“Ethical behavior lies at the core of every profession. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) *Code of Ethics* sets forth values and principles to guide social workers’ professional conduct. A code of ethics cannot guarantee ethical behavior. Ethical behavior comes from a social worker’s individual commitment to engage in ethical practice. Both the spirit and the letter of this *Code of Ethics* will guide social workers as they act in good faith and with a genuine desire to make sound judgements ...

The CASW *Code of Ethics* does not provide a set of rules that prescribe how social workers should act in all situations. Further, the Code of Ethics does not specify which values and principles are most important and which outweigh others in instances of conflict. Reasonable differences of opinion exist among social workers with respect to which values and principles should be given priority in a particular situation. Further, a social worker’s personal values, culture, religious beliefs, practices and/or other important distinctions, such as age, ability, gender or sexual orientation, can affect his/her ethical choices. Thus, social workers need to be aware of any conflicts between personal and professional values and deal with them responsibly.

Social work is a multifaceted profession. As professionals, social workers are educated to exercise judgment in the face of complex and competing interests and claims. Ethical decision making in a given situation will involve the informed judgment of the individual social worker. Instances may arise when social workers’ ethical obligations conflict with agency policies or relevant laws or regulations. When such conflicts occur, social workers shall make a reasonable effort to resolve the conflicts in a manner that is consistent with the values and principles expressed in this *Code of Ethics*. If a reasonable resolution of the conflict does not appear possible, social workers shall seek appropriate consultation before making a decision. This may involve consultation with an ethics committee, a regulatory body, a knowledgeable colleague, supervisor or

legal counsel.” (Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) *Code of Ethics* (2005, pp. 2 - 3)

NSASW, through its Standards and Ethics Committee, has carefully examined the CASW *Code of Ethics* and made adaptations, as permitted in the *Social Workers Act*. The Committee also reviewed the Codes from Australia, New Zealand, the U.S.A., Britain, the International Federation of Social Workers and the Codes of the provinces of New Brunswick, Alberta and Quebec. Information was also gathered from the *Model Social Work Practice Act* developed by the Association of Social Work Boards and the *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* developed by the U.S National Association of Social Workers and the Association of Social Work Boards.

The *Code of Ethics* applies to all Registered Social Workers, Social Worker Candidates and Registered Social Workers (provisional). The use of the term social worker within this Code includes all Registered Social Workers, Social Worker Candidates and Registered Social Workers (provisional).

A violation of the *Code of Ethics* constitutes unprofessional or unethical conduct and constitutes grounds for disciplinary action or denial of registration.

While this document may be reviewed at any time, it must be formally reviewed by NSASW at least once every seven years. See Chapter 10 of the *NSASW Standards of Practice, November 2008*.

Preamble

The Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers believes that the social work profession is founded on humanitarian and egalitarian ideals. We envision and work towards a society that promotes social, economic, political, and cultural equality for all people.

NSASW recognizes that we practice social work in many different settings, and that each workplace presents challenges in resolving differences in expectations, values and resource allocation. Struggles with ethical issues are inherent to the practice of social work and one of the biggest challenges that we personally face as we do our jobs. We are often called upon to redefine or reassess how we practice as ethical social workers within or in relation to an institutional or community environment.

As social workers, we are aware of individual as well as collective needs. We acknowledge that, often, larger changes may need to happen at the local, community, provincial, national or world level, in order for the injustices that we see daily to be addressed or remedied.

The profession has a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed and/or living in poverty. Social workers are committed to human rights as enshrined in Canadian law, as well as in international conventions on human rights created or supported by the United Nations.

Core Social Work Values and Principles

Social workers uphold the following core social work values:

Value 1: Respect for Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice

Value 3: Service to Humanity

Value 4: Integrity of Professional Practice

Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice

Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice

The following section describes each of these values and discusses their underlying principles.

Value 1: Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons

Social work is founded on a long standing commitment to respect the inherent dignity and individual worth of all persons. When required by law to override a client's wishes social workers take care to use minimum coercion required. Social workers recognize and respect the diversity of Canadian society, taking into account the breadth of differences that exist among individuals, families, groups, and communities. Social workers uphold the human rights of individuals and groups as expressed in *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) and the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948).

Principles:

- Social workers respect the unique worth and inherent dignity of all people and uphold human rights.
- Social workers uphold each person's right to self-determination consistent with that person's capacity and with the rights of others.
- Social workers respect the diversity among individuals in Canadian society and the right of individuals to their unique beliefs consistent with the rights of others.
- Social workers respect the client's right to make choices based on voluntary, informed consent.

- Social Workers who have children as clients determine the child's ability to give consent and where appropriate, explain to the child and to the child's parents/guardians, the nature of the social worker's relationship to the child.
- Social workers uphold the right of society to impose limitations on the self-determination of individuals, when such limitations protect individuals from self-harm and from harming others.
- Social workers uphold the right of every person to be free from violence and the threat of violence.

Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice

Social workers believe in the obligation of people, individually and collectively, to provide resources, services and opportunities for the overall benefit of humanity and to afford them protection from harm. Social workers promote social fairness and the equitable distribution of resources, and act to reduce barriers and expand choice for all persons, with special regard for those who are marginalized, disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or have exceptional needs. Social workers oppose prejudice and discrimination against any person or group of persons, on any grounds, and specifically challenge views and actions that stereotype particular persons or groups.

It is recognized that social workers may encounter particular challenges in carrying out their ethical responsibilities for social justice and change for the following reasons:

- Social workers function as both helpers and controllers.
- There are conflicts between the duty of social workers to protect the interests of the people whom they serve, their employers, and societal demands for efficiency and utility.
- Resources in society are limited.

Advocacy is an important tool which social workers can use in their efforts to promote social justice. Social workers advocate for many things:

- Fair and equitable access to public services.
- Equal treatment and protection under the law and challenge injustices, especially injustices that effect the vulnerable and disadvantaged.
- The client, when services in the best interest of that client are not available or accessible.
- The elimination of all forms of discrimination and make reasonable efforts to promote conditions that respect the diversity of people.
- The elimination of poverty.
- The equitable distribution of society's resources to all persons. They bring to the attention of employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practices are oppressive, unfair or harmful.

- Universal entitlement and access to the services and opportunities to meet basic human needs in the areas of housing, health care, child care, education and old age security.
- A clean and healthy environment and the development of sustainable environmental strategies.

Principles:

- Social workers uphold the right of people to have access to resources to meet basic human needs.
- Social workers respect and celebrate the diversity of the society in which they practice, taking account of individual, family, group and community differences.
- Social workers are aware that systemic oppression can influence policies, programs and services, and that acting in the best interest of their clients may mean recognizing and challenging this oppression.
- Social workers promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels and the development of people, communities and their environments. Social workers will advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and will promote social, economic, political and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.
- Social workers facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions.

Value 3: Service to Humanity

The social work profession upholds service in the interests of others, consistent with social justice, as a core professional objective. In professional practice, social workers balance individual needs, and rights and freedoms with collective interests in the service of humanity. When acting in a professional capacity, social workers place professional service before personal goals or advantage, and use their power and authority in disciplined and responsible ways that serve society. The social work profession contributes to knowledge and skills that assist in the management of conflicts and the wide-ranging consequences of conflict.

Principles:

- Social workers place the needs of others above self-interest when acting in a professional capacity.

- Social workers strive to use the power and authority vested in them as professionals in responsible ways that serve the needs of clients and the promotion of social justice.
- Social workers promote individual development and pursuit of individual goals, as well as the development of a just society.
- Social workers use their knowledge and skills in bringing about fair resolutions to conflict and in assisting those affected by conflict.

Value 4: Integrity of Professional Practice

Social workers demonstrate respect for the profession's purpose, values and ethical principles relevant to their field of practice. Social workers maintain a high level of professional conduct by acting honestly and responsibly and promoting the values of the profession. Social workers strive for impartiality in their professional practice, and refrain from imposing their personal values, views, preferences, stereotypes/assumptions on clients and seek to understand the lived experiences of those whom they serve. It is the responsibility of social workers to establish the tenor of their professional relationship with clients, and others to whom they have a professional duty, and to maintain professional boundaries. As individuals, social workers take care in their actions to not bring the reputation of the profession into disrepute. An essential element of integrity in professional practice is ethical accountability based on the *CASW Code of Ethics, as amended for NSASW (1994)*, the *CASW Code of Ethics (2005)*, the *IFSW Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles (2004)*, and other relevant provincial standards and guidelines. Where conflicts or uncertainties exist with respect to these resources of ethical guidance or with respect to the interpretation or application, social workers are encouraged to seek advice, including consultation with their regulatory body.

Principles:

- Social workers demonstrate and promote the qualities of honesty, reliability, fairness and diligence in their professional practice.
- Social workers demonstrate adherence to the values and ethical principles of the profession and promote respect for the profession's values and principles in organizations where they work or with which they have a professional affiliation.
- Social workers establish appropriate boundaries in relationships with clients and ensure that the relationship serves the needs of clients.
- Social workers value openness and transparency in professional practice and avoid relationships where their integrity, fairness or impartiality may be compromised, ensuring that should such a conflict of interest be unavoidable, the nature of the conflict is fully disclosed.

Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice

A cornerstone of professional social work relationships is confidentiality with respect to all matters associated with professional services to clients. Social workers demonstrate respect for the trust and confidence placed in them by clients, communities and other professionals by protecting the privacy of client information and respecting the client's right to control when or whether this information will be shared with third parties. Social workers only disclose confidential information to other parties (including family members) with the informed consent of clients, client's 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. In all instances, social workers disclose the least amount of confidential information necessary to achieve the desired purpose.

Principles:

- Social workers respect the importance of the trust and confidence placed in the professional relationship by clients and members of the public.
- Social workers respect the client's right to confidentiality of information shared in a professional context.
- Social workers only disclose confidential information with the informed consent of the client or permission of client's legally appointed representative.
- Social workers may break confidentiality and communicate client information without permission when required or permitted by relevant laws, court order or this *Code*.
- Social workers demonstrate transparency with respect to limits to confidentiality that apply to their professional practice by clearly communicating these limitations to clients early in their relationship.

Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice

Social workers respect a client's right to competent social work services. Social workers analyze the nature of social needs and problems, and encourage innovative, effective strategies and techniques to meet both new and existing needs and, where possible, contribute to the knowledge base of the profession. Social workers have a responsibility to maintain professional proficiency, to continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills, and to apply new knowledge in practice commensurate with their level of professional education, skill and competency, seeking consultation and supervision as appropriate.

Principles:

- Social workers uphold the right of clients to be offered the highest quality services possible.
- Social workers strive to maintain and increase their professional knowledge and skill.
- Social workers demonstrate due care for client's interests and safety by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence.
- Social workers contribute to the on-going development of the profession and its ability to serve humanity, where possible, by participating in the development of current and future social workers and the development of new professional knowledge.
- Social workers who engage in research minimize risks to participants, ensure informed consent, maintain confidentiality and accurately report the results of their studies.