

# 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.

## Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice

Social workers have an ethical responsibility to promote and advance social justice, equality, and human rights, while challenging discrimination and oppression in all its forms. This edition of the Ethical Compass will highlight important areas and standards of practice for social workers to consider as they continue to advocate for change in the best interest of clients and the betterment of society.

### *Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons*

The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice, the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice (and the NLASW companion explanatory document Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice produced in 2016), highlights the importance of dignity, respect, equality and self-determination in the delivery of social work services. In reflecting on cultural competence, the following sections are important:

CASW (2005) Code of Ethics: “Social workers respect the unique worth and inherent dignity of all people and uphold human rights” (p.4).

CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice: “Social workers acknowledge the diversity within and among individuals, communities and cultures” (p. 4).

NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice: “Culturally competent practice requires a commitment to increasing one’s knowledge and appreciation for diverse cultures, embracing culture as a central focus in social work practice, and becoming aware of one’s own culture, values and beliefs and how this impacts cross cultural practice” (p. 13).

### *What do we mean by Cultural Competence?*

Cultural competence, from an ethical perspective, is an umbrella term for the knowledge and skills social workers require in working within the cultural context of clients. It incorporates cultural sensitivity, awareness, humility, safety, and responsiveness. Cultural competence is an on-going process (not an end point) of learning, reflection, and professional growth.

## *Fostering Cultural Competence in Practice*

*Cultural humility:* Just as all cultures are unique, so is the individual's experience of culture. In fostering culturally competent practice, social workers avoid overgeneralizations and embrace cultural humility to learn from each client about their experience of culture and the impact this has on their health and social well-being. This is addressed in Standard 3 of the NLASW (2016) Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice: "Social workers seek to understand the values, beliefs, traditions and historical context of clients and incorporate this knowledge into social work assessments and interventions" (p.7).

*Lifelong learning:* Social workers embrace a commitment to life-long learning. Standard 5 of the NLASW (2016) Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice notes: "Social workers engage in continuing professional development to foster knowledge, skills and abilities in working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds" (p.13). This can include formal learning from workshops and conferences to conversations with community leaders. An important question to keep asking is "How can I continue to enhance my knowledge and skills in working with diverse cultures"?

*Self-reflection:* Standard 2 of the NLASW (2016) Standards for Cultural Competence highlights that social workers must "recognize and appreciate the importance of being aware of one's own cultural identity and experiences in cross cultural practice" (p. 5). This process of self-reflection includes examining our own values, beliefs, and biases. "What culture (s) do I identify with and how do I express culture to others? What biases (subtle or overt) do I hold? What is my sense of privilege and how does this impact my worldview and ideas about oppression"?

*Leadership and Advocacy:* As noted in the NLASW (2016) Standards for Cultural Competence, "Social workers demonstrate leadership to advance inclusive organizational policies and culturally informed services and programs, and to inform systemic change" (p.12). Through collaborative and respectful relationships social workers raise awareness to social injustices to promote culturally informed practice. A question for continued consideration is "How can I advocate for change towards cultural competence on an organizational and systems level"?

This edition of the Ethical Compass explored cultural competence in social work practice and highlighted important areas for social workers to reflect on in their work. It is through continued dialogue with our colleagues and clients that we will continue to grow in our journey of cultural competence; a journey built on respect, collaboration, inclusion and cultural awareness.

### References:

- CASW. (2005). *Code of ethics*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- CASW. (2005). *Guidelines for ethical practice*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- NLASW. (2018). *Standards of practice for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. Johns, NL: Author.
- NLASW. (2016). *Standards for cultural competence in social work practice (explanatory document)*. St. John's, NL: Author.