

Ethical Compass



Ethical Compass is an initiative of the NLCSW 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 NLCSW ethical consultation process and from a review of ethical trends in practice.

Balancing Personal Interests in Professional Practice

Social work practice in Newfoundland and Labrador is guided by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and the Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2020) Standards of Practice. Social workers strive to maintain the best interests of clients, ensure clients receive competent and high-quality services, uphold integrity, maintain professional boundaries, and promote professionalism. However, there may be times when personal interests intersect with professional practice, resulting in an ethical dilemma. This edition of Ethical Compass will pose questions for reflection and highlight areas for consideration when personal interests intersect with professional practice.

Practice Dilemmas: 1. You are looking to buy a car, and a client is selling one in your price range. 2. Your spouse is a private practitioner, and one of your clients is looking for a private practice referral for their child. 3. You are fundraising for a charity, and a client wants to donate. 4. You need your house painted, and one of your clients is an excellent painter. 5. Your mother requires home care, and a client is a home care worker.

Ethical Decision-Making: The NLCSW (2021) [Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work Practice](#) is a great resource for social workers to use when navigating ethical issues in practice. A key component of ethical decision-making is a review of one's regulatory documents. When personal interests intersect with professional practice, social workers consider the following:

CASW (2005) Code of Ethics:

“Social workers place the needs of others above self-interest when acting in a professional capacity” (p.6).

“Social workers strive to use the power and authority vested in them as professionals in responsible ways that serve the needs of clients ...” (p.6).

“Social workers establish appropriate boundaries in relationships with clients and ensure that the relationship serves the needs of clients” (p.7).

CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice:

“Social workers maintain the best interests of clients as a priority...” (p.3).

“Social workers do not exploit professional relationships for personal benefit, gain or gratification” (p.11).

“Social workers do not take unfair advantage of any professional relationship or exploit others to further their personal, religious, political or business interests” (p.11).

NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice:

“Social workers identify ethical considerations in social work practice, and seek to resolve ethical issues/dilemmas that are consistent with social work ethics” (p.11).

“Social workers evaluate potential or actual dual or multiple relationships to ensure that the client’s interests remain primary” (p. 11).

“Social workers document their ethical decision-making process and decisions” (p, 11).

“Social workers do not engage in activities or behaviors that diminish public trust in social workers or the social work profession” (p. 17).

Reflection Questions: In addition to a review of the code, guidelines and standards, the following reflection questions may be helpful to explore:

- Will this situation have an impact on my professional relationship with my client (s)?
- Am I placing the client first, or am I motivated by my own needs?
- Could professional boundaries be impacted?
- Can I explain the rationale for my decision based on an ethical decision-making process and my ethical responsibilities?
- Would I consider it reasonable for another social worker to make a similar decision given the facts and circumstances?
- Are there alternative options that exist?
- How might the situation be perceived by the client?
- How might this situation be viewed by my colleagues/employer?
- How would I document my decision-making?

This edition of Ethical Compass addressed areas for social workers to consider when professional and personal interests intersect. Social workers reflect on the ethical principles, guidelines, and standards, and make decisions in the best interests of clients consistent with ethical responsibilities. Seeking appropriate consultation and supervision to navigate these ethical complexities in practice is also important. The NLCSW website (www.nlcsw.ca) has a wealth of practice resources social workers can access when working through ethical dilemmas in practice.

References:

- CASW. (2005a). *Code of ethics*. https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/CASW_Code_of_Ethics_2005.pdf
- CASW. (2005b). *Guidelines for ethical practice*. https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/CASW_Guidelines_for_Ethical_Practice_2005.pdf
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- NLCSW. (2020). *Standards of practice for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador*. https://nlcsw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Standards_of_Practice_for_Social_Workers_in_NL.pdf