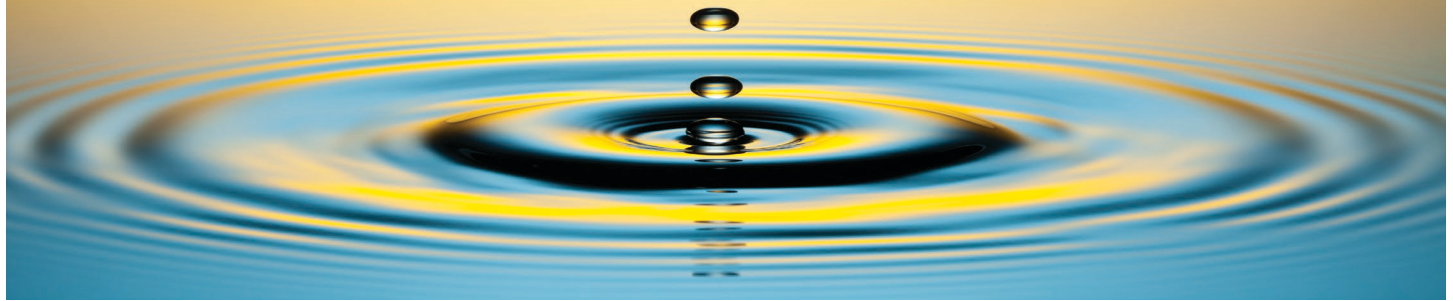


# Practice Matters



***Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.***

## Linking Continuing Education and Competency

**Lisa Crockwell MSW, RSW**

Social workers are committed to life-long learning. As an ethical, legal, and professional obligation, this commitment is grounded in wanting to ensure the highest quality of practice. Social work is also a diverse and complex profession. Social workers are employed across several fields of practice which require emphasis on different skill sets. The scope of social work includes counselling and therapy, management and supervision, policy analysis and research. Life-long learning is associated with continuing professional education (CPE). This edition of Practice Matters will explore the link between CPE and competence highlighting the importance of selecting meaningful education which advances practice.

### Competency

Competence is defined as “The ability to fulfil the requirements of a job or other obligation. Competence includes the possession of all relevant educational and experiential requirements...and the ability to carry out work assignments and achieve social work goals while adhering to the values and code of ethics of the profession.” (Barker, 2014, p.84).

Competence in professional practice is one of the six core values in the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005) Code of Ethics. This code of ethics has been adopted for use in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) under the provincial *Social Workers Act*. As noted in the Code “*Social workers have a responsibility to maintain professional proficiency, to continually strive to*

*increase ...knowledge and skills and to apply new knowledge in practice commensurate with ...level of professional education” (p.8). Commitment to adhere to the Code is declared upon application and renewal of social work registration.*

This core value is based upon the profession’s respect for the client’s right to competent social work services. Recognizing that the Code of Ethics defines a client as “*A person, family group of persons, incorporated body, association or community on whose behalf a social worker provides a service or to whom the social worker is legally obligated to provide a service.*” (p. 10).

The principles outlined in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics include the ethical obligation to maintain and increase professional knowledge and skill, limit professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence and seek consultation and supervision when appropriate. The principles are expanded in the CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice and the NLCSW (2020) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. These documents are adopted through the bylaws, and forms part of the regulatory framework for the profession in this province.

Completing a Bachelor and/or Master of Social Work degree is the educational foundation for practice of the profession in NL. Competency is established through the credential. If an individual does not practice for three years or more the foundation is reassessed through use of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) exam. This exam measures minimum competency and is not a capstone for education or a reflection of knowledge beyond the baseline. This is the reason social work education is a prerequisite to write the exam.

Beyond the foundational education, competency develops over the course of a professional career as learning occurs every day through experience, consulting with others and obtaining supervision. Competency is also about consistent self-reflection advanced by the continuing education (CE) we choose to complete on an annual basis.

## Continuing Professional Education (CPE)

Reference to CPE is contained both in the *Social Workers Act* and the *Social Workers Regulations*. Section 39 of the *Act* references NLCSW’s obligation to maintain a quality assurance program which includes mandatory continuing education and professional development designed to promote continuing competence. Section 7 of the *Regulations* requires every registered social worker to complete a minimum of 40 hours of continuing education annually. The CASW Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice include the responsibility to uphold provincial regulations for continuing professional education.

Standard 2 of the NLCSW Standards of Practice focuses specifically on competence. It includes the responsibility not to claim expertise in an area solely by attending a lecture, conference, or workshop

and to assess when a client's needs are outside the parameter of expertise. The obligation to be competent is imbedded throughout the standards referencing the need to address impairments, to understand informed consent, confidentiality, and boundaries. Technological competency if engaging in electronic practice is included. Cultural competency encompassing a commitment to increasing knowledge and appreciation for diverse cultures, and being aware of the impact of one's culture, values, and beliefs on social work practice is highlighted.

The NLCSW CPE policy has been designed to implement the CPE obligations with the diversity of the profession in mind; recognizing that social work has a broad scope. Therefore, professional social workers use judgement to determine the type of CPE activities that will best meet learning needs.

The NLCSW CPE self-reflection tool was also designed to assist social workers to reflect on CE needs at points in time. Factors such as years of experience in particular fields, previous education, opportunities for supervision and consultation and individual strengths affect competency and should influence the type of continuing education required. Although the CPE policy and the legislation dictates forty credits, the nature of those credits is a matter of choice which determines whether the credits selected genuinely increases knowledge and skills and therefore competency.

How do we select meaningful CE which will advance social work practice and not just fill in the blanks on the registration renewal form? Grounding the choice of continuing education in the various areas of the Standards is a natural connection. Reflection on the knowledge that is important for practice across all fields is encouraged and should be included as some of the credits obtained on an annual basis. The CPE self-reflection tool identifies the following areas:

- Code of ethics, ethical guidelines, standards of practice and ethical decision-making models.
- Principles of documentation
- Informed consent
- Confidentiality, privacy, and disclosure of information
- Professional boundaries
- Social work theory and intervention

Consider the following examples:

- 1) Mary has been practicing social work for almost twenty years. The first ten years was direct practice in health care and for the last nine she has been working in a community-based setting. She has a Master of Social Work degree and has been selecting CE related to her employment ensuring she is advancing her skills in the best interest of the clients of the agency. Last year she accepted a management position and is responsible for the supervision

of social workers. Mary engages in a period of self-reflection, reviews the Standards of Practice, and decides to choose CE which will enhance her competency in meaningful ways. Using the self-reflection tool, she develops CE goals related to supervision, team building skills, documentation and workshops which have a focus on social work ethics. Some of these areas are refreshers but Mary also realizes that gaining knowledge at different points in one's professional career has different meaning within a different context of practice.

- 2) John graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work degree three years ago. He has a strong interest in clinical practice and would eventually like to work in employee wellness and employee assistance as a private practitioner. He reviews the self-assessment tool to determine selection of continuing education. He decides that while there are many interesting workshops and training, he cannot attain the level of expertise he would like to have through conferences and workshops. The continuing education which will be meaningful for him is to pursue graduate studies. He is at a point in his life when this is possible.
- 3) Marie graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work degree 10 years ago and has a keen interest in social work ethics. She selects ethics webinars as a source of CE whenever she can. This year Marie concentrated on choosing elective credits which supplemented the workshops and webinars she attended. She read journal articles, ethics books and the practice resources available on the NLCSW website. She started using the NLCSW ethical decision-making tool as she worked through dilemmas in practice. She found the combination of informal as well as formal learning to be quite meaningful.

As we think about continuing education choices over the next year, we know some choices will be determined by what is accessible, fits into schedules, and what is necessary within fields of practice. Thinking about the larger picture and choosing continuing education which crosses the spectrum of the profession, speaks to our professional curiosity and interests, and is oriented towards career goals at points in time can be professionally rewarding. Reflecting and linking continuing education to intentionally increase competency is the key to meaningful life-long learning.

## Conclusion

This edition of Practice Matters explored the link between competency and continuing education. Social workers have a responsibility to obtain continuing professional education that not just meets the forty-hour requirement but is meaningful to advance the ethical obligation of lifelong learning. Returning to the foundation of the profession specifically the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice to ensure thorough knowledge is helpful. NLCSW offers continuing education and provides

practice resources which cross all fields. Information about CPE requirements, resources and links to events is available at <https://nlcsw.ca/continuing-education>

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