



Letter of Guidance Re: Technology and Social Work Practice

Dear Member,

The [Government of New Brunswick has issued a revised declaration of a State of Emergency](#), which has altered its directive to regulated health care professionals, including social workers.

As the revised [declaration states](#), “Regulated health professionals are prohibited from providing in-person services except those services they deem essential for the health and wellbeing of their clients. The offering of services is permitted conditional on compliance with all applicable control measures in the NB OCMOH Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Primary Care Providers in a Community Setting.”

The NBASW has advised private practitioners that this revision to the declaration means that it is now up to the professional to determine if an in-person appointment with a client is essential, and all in-person appointments must comply with the measures outlined in the [NB OCMOH Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Guidance for Primary Care Providers in a Community Setting](#).

The NBASW would also like to advise members who are not working in private practice that the decision about whether an in-person appointment with a client is essential remains at the discretion of the social worker’s employer.

When face-to-face meetings are non-essential, social workers can use telephone and electronic means to maintain appointments with clients. As a result of this shift in practice, some members have been asking for guidance on how to serve their clients with technology, while adhering to practice guidelines and ethical obligations.

To help guide you in how to use technology in social work practice, please consult our [Standards for the Use of Technology in Social Work Practice](#). This is to serve as a guide for social workers who do not already have policies and procedures in place regarding electronic practice at their workplaces. For further guidance, please consult the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) [Social Media Use and Social Work Practice](#).

This letter is intended to provide guidance and support to social workers when engaging in electronic social work practice, such as the use of computers and other electronic means.

1. Telephonic, Electronic and Web-Based Services

In order to maintain appointments with clients, social workers may provide services via telephone or other electronic means (examples include e-mail, online counselling, online support groups, video conferencing, etc.). It is expected that, regardless of the medium used for service delivery, social workers practice within the limits of their competencies, skills, and knowledge with the technology. It is also important to use a secure internet connection rather than public/free Wi-Fi.

When choosing to use communication technology, members should review information about the technology with respect to confidentiality and security. NBASW recommendations include, but are not limited to, the following video conferencing platforms for social workers:

- Skype for Business (paid subscription);
- Microsoft 365 with Microsoft Team (paid versions); and
- Zoom (paid versions).

These networks require the use of a password and an access code for clients. There are also a variety of telehealth programs available online. All communication platforms must be fully researched by social workers prior to utilization and must meet high security standards.

Like the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick (CPNB), the NBASW believes that closed or private paid networks offer better computer security because they are encrypted. However, as the CPNB states, any web platform can theoretically be hacked. Therefore, clients must be informed of the inherent risks associated with the use of these technologies and consent to their use in an informed manner.

It is also important that social workers understand the regulatory requirements of outside jurisdictions, before providing electronic social work services to clients outside of the province. It is the responsibility of the social worker to consult with the social work regulatory body in the jurisdiction in which the client resides to confirm that the social worker is adequately licensed to practice in their client's place of residence.

2. Liability Insurance

As part of the [NBASW Code of Ethics \(2007\)](#), social workers in private practice must maintain adequate malpractice, defamation and liability insurance. At this time, the NBASW is recommending that all members who are incorporating the use of technology into their social work practice have an updated professional liability insurance policy that adequately covers the provision of electronic social work services in New Brunswick. The [CASW liability insurance program](#) offers a full range of coverage options that are specifically designed to

meet your practice risk needs, such as E-Services coverage and Cyber Liability & Privacy Breach coverage.

3. Informed consent

As per the [NBASW Code of Ethics \(2007\)](#), social workers shall provide services to clients only on valid informed consent or when required to by legislation or by a court. When social workers incorporate the use of technology into their social work practice, they must also obtain informed consent from the client.

Members should ensure that clients are informed about the technologies that are being used in the delivery of social work services, including any potential limitations or risks posed while using the technology. Social workers should also consider the client's level of comfort, ability and capacity with regards to technology. Prior to starting electronic social work services (e.g., videoconference services), social workers will need to explain how to use the program. If clients do not wish to use services provided through electronic technology, social workers can identify alternate methods of service (e.g., telephone).

If social workers are not able to receive official written consent from a client, the NBASW recommends accepting a consent form that includes the client's electronic signature (e.g., PDF fillable forms). If a client does not have access to a computer to provide an electronic signature, members can accept verbal consent from a client (e.g., via telephone). The social worker will need to document the constraints of not being able to receive written consent in the client's file and receive written consent at a later date if possible.

4. Documentation and Confidentiality

As with all social work documentation, social workers must continue to adhere to organizational policies and ethical standards. When electronic communication is used to connect with clients, there should be clear policies in place about response time and how the information will be documented. When using electronic forms of documentation or information collection (e.g., laptop), social workers must develop risk management strategies (e.g., computer password, back up files, etc.).

5. Handling of Client Records

When handling clients' records, social workers must maintain one master file of professional interventions and opinions, while adhering to the obligations and standards of their employer

(if applicable) and ethical standards and responsibilities. While social workers may use technology for keeping records, social workers shall maintain the confidentiality of the information that is contained in the record in accordance with agency/organizational policies and ethical standards.

6. Storage of Client Files

Social workers shall store/dispose of physical or electronic records in a way that protects client confidentiality and maintains the confidentiality of the information contained within those records. Members employed by an organization acquire and maintain a thorough understanding of the organization's policies with regards to the retention, storage, preservation, and security of records.

Self-employed social workers must also comply with privacy legislation and establish clear policies relating to record retention, storage, preservation, and security. Social workers must also take the necessary steps to protect the confidentiality and security of physical and electronic records and all other communications.

Social workers must take reasonable steps to ensure that client's records are stored in a secure location and are not available to others who are not authorized to have access.

Thank you for your dedication and hard work during this time.

Sincerely,



Martine Paquet, RSW, Registrar