



2020

STANDARDS REGARDING TELEHEALTH SERVICES, THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

New Brunswick Association of Social Workers

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PREFACE

The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW), in partnership with the Ethics, Practice Issues, and Professional Standards Committee, has developed these standards for New Brunswick social workers who may be dealing with matters related to the use of technology and subsequent telehealth service delivery.

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The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) wishes to thank the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) for their permission to use the *CASW Social Media Use and Social Work Practice in the development of Standards Regarding Telehealth Services, the Use of Technology and Social Work Practice*. The NBASW also recognizes with great appreciation the work that went into the development of this valuable resource.

The NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) served as the foundational document in developing these standards. Additionally, the following standards are informed by the Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) *Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice* (2012), and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* (2005).

PREAMBLE

Social workers uphold the following core social work values, highlighted within the NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007):

- Value 1: Respect for Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons
- Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice
- Value 3: Service to Humanity
- Value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice
- Value 5: Confidentiality in Professional Practice
- Value 6: Competence in Professional Practice

The NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) establishes ethical duties and obligations for social work practice in the province of New Brunswick and provides a set of standards that prescribe how social workers should act. The NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) emphasizes the following eight ethical obligations:

1. Ethical Obligations to Clients
2. Ethical Obligations in Professional Relationships
3. Ethical Obligations to Colleagues
4. Ethical Obligations in the Workplace
5. Ethical Obligations in Private Practice
6. Ethical Obligations in Research
7. Ethical Obligations to the Profession
8. Ethical Obligations to Society



SUMMARY

The use of technology and subsequent telehealth service delivery has become an essential part of social work practice, as telecommunications continue to evolve and expand. The term 'telecommunication' encompasses any form of communication that takes place through electronic means, such as telephone, cable, telegraph, broadcasting, internet, video conferencing platforms, or through text message. Social workers must examine the use of technology within the realm of professional practice and ethical decision-making. The *NBASW Standards Regarding Telehealth Services, the Use of Technology and Social Work Practice* have been developed to guide social workers through their use of technology and optimizing telehealth service delivery while exploring ethical challenges and considerations and heightening best practices, which are grounded in the *NBASW Code of Ethics (2007)*. Aside from the *NBASW Code of Ethics (2007)*, social workers are required to adhere to Federal and Provincial Legislation and members are encouraged to utilize this document in collaboration with workplace policies and procedures. This document is also an enhancement of the *NBASW Standards for the use of technology in social work practice (2010)*.

BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY

The use of telecommunication is expanding rapidly, and as a result, individuals are using different applications, platforms, and social media outlets to communicate with others, both personally and professionally. These means of communication might include email, social media platforms, telephone calls, texting, websites, video conferencing, online telehealth services, or other electronic means of communication. Technology is a valuable and rapidly advancing tool that has many benefits when used appropriately.

Some of these benefits from a professional viewpoint include the capacity to reach a wider audience at a lower cost, provide services to those who are unable to travel or reside in rural communities, quickly responding to client queries, enhance effective communication and the sharing of information and resources, and the promotion of research. Noteworthy, some service users may prefer electronic means of communication/telehealth service delivery. This preferred method of service delivery may be a result of various influential factors such as mental health diagnosis, physical health conditions/concerns, financial restraints (inability to afford travel, childcare), present work schedule (inability to take time off) and location (residing in a rural community). Telecommunications, when used responsibly, can support social workers to raise the profile of the profession and network with others nationally and internationally. Members of



the NBASW must be aware that the use of technology while providing numerous benefits, should be utilized with caution and with the best interest of the client as the foremost consideration.

Alongside the benefits are ensuing shortcomings regarding the use of technology, such as issues with internet connectivity (slow internet, availability of internet in rural areas, financial requirements), possible technology failure and interruption of services, ethical considerations regarding confidentiality and privacy, failure to identify the physical well-being of a client and inability to form a therapeutic bond in person. As mentioned by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2020, p. 7), social workers from around the world have noted “the difficulties of building trusting relationships remotely with new service users, keeping contact with some service users who go ‘off the radar’, maintaining meaningful participation of children and families in virtual case conferences and the heart-breaking impact of breaking bad news (a death or child removal) over the phone.” Service providers must be mindful of these drawbacks and recognize the incompatibility between this form of service provision and service users. It is evident that telehealth service delivery does not work for everyone, and in some cases, can discourage them from further utilizing services.

ETHICAL CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL RISKS: TECHNOLOGY

As indicated, technology, telecommunication, and telehealth services are growing increasingly prominent within contemporary society and have influenced the profession of social work. Aside from micro-level social work, and individual service provision, technology assists social workers in the collection and management of information, participation in social justice issues, development of social policies, networking with other professionals, and furthering education and corresponding research in the field (NASW, 2017).

According to the NASW (2017, p. 11), “Technology may be used to facilitate various forms of services, including counseling, case management, support, and other social work functions. Technology may also be used to facilitate communication with clients, obtain information from clients, provide information to clients, and facilitate various interventions.” Examples of ethical dilemmas concerning the use of technology include, but are not limited to, ensuring confidentiality and privacy, maintaining quality service provision and meeting client needs, concerns regarding consent, insurance complications, and enforcing proper boundaries with clients, colleagues, and supervisees. Although previously outlined by the NASW (2017), CASW (2014), and NBASW (2010), the NBASW aims to address present-day technological advancements



and the evolution of the profession of social work in *Standards Regarding Telehealth Services, the Use of Technology and Social Work Practice*.

ETHICAL CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL RISKS: SOCIAL MEDIA

Many social workers use social media in their professional and personal lives. While its' use may seem straightforward, many ethical challenges need to be explored and discussed.

As outlined by Johns (2012), "modern day technologies continue to challenge our profession to think critically about professional/personal boundaries, self-disclosure, dual and multiple relationships, privacy and conflicts of interest within an ethical framework." Examples of ethical dilemmas pertaining to social media use include how to handle friend requests from current or former clients, deciding whether to search or follow a client on a social media platform, whether to post information related to the workplace and clients, whether to comment regarding co-workers on a blog or personal social media profile, or whether to use client testimonials on their professional website. The NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) does not address the use of social media and other electronic communication specifically but does guide the ethical issues that warrant significant attention and consideration. While social media presents a different forum for the sharing of information and building connections, the ethical issues remain the same, and ethical principles and standards must equally apply.

STANDARDS FOR TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2017) establishes ethical duties and obligations for the practice of social work. Here are sections of the Code that pertain to technology in professional practice:

ETHICAL OBLIGATION TO CLIENTS

As outlined within Value 1 of the NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007), social workers are obligated to respect the inherent dignity and worth of persons. With that said, the social work profession strives to uphold human rights, and advocate for an individual's right to self-determination. These are fundamental principles that must be considered within the context of telehealth services. The NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) indicates:

1.1 Priority of Clients Interests

1.1.1 Social workers shall maintain the best interests of clients as the priority professional obligation. The social worker shall be guided

primarily by this obligation and any action which is substantially inconsistent with this obligation is an unethical action.

1.1.5 Social workers shall limit their involvement in the personal affairs of clients to matters related to service being provided.

1.3 Client Self-Determination

1.3.1 Social workers shall respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify goals.

1.3.2 Social workers, at the earliest opportunity, shall discuss with clients their rights and responsibilities and provide them with honest and accurate information regarding the following:

- the nature of the social work service being offered;*
- the recording of information and who will have access to such information;*
- the purpose, nature, extent and known implications of the options open to them;*
- the potential risks and benefits of proposed social work interventions;*
- their right to obtain a second opinion or to refuse or cease service (recognizing the limitations that apply when working with involuntary clients);*
- the client's right to view professional records and to seek avenues of complaint; and,*
- the limitations on professional confidentiality.*

Maintaining the best interest of the client and promoting self-determination are equally as crucial through telecommunication as it is in-person. Therefore, at the earliest opportunity, social workers are required to discuss with clients their rights, responsibilities, and the limits of confidentiality. They are also required to use their client's personal preference reasonably regarding their favored method of service delivery (e.g., in-person, via phone or through videoconferencing), discuss the nature of relevant social work intervention, highlight corresponding strengths and shortcomings, and adequately assess the well-being of their clients. Furthermore, regardless of the medium used for service delivery, social workers are required to practice within the limits of their competencies, skills, and knowledge with the technology. It is



also essential to use a secure internet connection rather than public/free Wi-Fi. Moreover, social workers must clarify what information will be shared, what will be documented, and included within the client's record. Also, clients should understand the limits and boundaries associated with telehealth services and the appropriate use of technology.

When choosing to use communication technology, members should review information about the technology concerning confidentiality and security. Noteworthy, several employers provide specific programs that must be used by social work employees while conducting telehealth services. Individuals who may not have a telecommunications program available through their employer are responsible of researching video conferencing platforms that requires the use of a password and an access code for clients. Specifically, end to end encrypted software that ensures our members maintain high security standards. Members are encouraged to contact the NBASW directly if they are unsure of adequately encrypted conferencing platforms.

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

1.2 Demonstrate Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity

1.2.1 Social workers shall obtain a working knowledge and understanding of their clients' racial and cultural affiliations, identities, values, beliefs and customs and shall be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to client's cultures and to differences among people cultural groups.

Furthermore, regarding Value 1 of the NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007), social workers are obligated to be culturally aware and practice in a culturally competent/safe manner, while remaining mindful of limitations associated with the use of technology. New Brunswick is a multicultural province; service providers must be aware of language barriers, differences in non-verbal communication, and viewpoints associated with the use of technology. Additionally, social workers should be conscious that telehealth service delivery may be culturally conceived as distant, unemotional, disconnected, and unreal.



1.4 Informed Consent

1.4.1 Social workers shall ensure that clients understand informed consent and the circumstances in which it may be required.

As mentioned, there is a multitude of ethical dilemmas associated with telehealth service delivery and the use of technology in social work practice, such as gaining informed consent. Foremost, social workers must confirm the identity of their clients. They must ensure that clients are fully informed, understand the nature of service provision, and are aware of the advantages and drawbacks associated with telehealth service delivery. When feasible, the client should sign a consent form and return it to the social worker by scanning or taking a photo. When this is not possible, the NBASW recommends accepting a consent form that includes the client's electronic signature (e.g., PDF fillable forms). In the case that neither option is achievable, or service provision occurs via telephone, the social worker can accept verbal consent and will need to document the details surrounding what the client has consented to and when this consent was acquired. They must also record why written consent could not be obtained and include this information within the client's file. The NBASW recommends that written consent is obtained at a later date when possible. While acquiring informed consent via telecommunications, it is difficult to determine the client's level of sufficient understanding. Therefore, social workers are required to initiate open-dialogue regarding telehealth service delivery and validate their client's comprehension of their self-determination and safety.

1.5 Confidentiality

1.5.1 Social workers shall protect the confidentiality of all information acquired from the client or others regarding the client and the client's family during the professional relationship unless the client authorizes in writing the release of specified information, the information is released under authority of a statute, order of a court of relevant jurisdiction, or by the Code and Standards of Practice.

1.5.2 Social workers shall discuss with clients the nature of confidentiality and limitations of clients' right to confidentiality at the earliest opportunity and throughout the relationship as required and shall review with clients when disclosure of confidential information may be legally or ethically required.



1.5.8 Social workers shall avoid unnecessary conversation regarding clients and shall take care not to discuss confidential information in public or semi-public areas such as hallways, waiting rooms, elevators, and restaurants.

1.5.9 Social workers shall take precautions to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information transmitted to other parties through the use of computers, electronic mail, facsimile machines, telephone answering machines and other electronic technology. Social workers shall inform clients of the limits to confidentiality that may apply to these forms of communication.

1.5.10 Social workers shall protect the confidentiality of clients' written and electronic records and shall take reasonable steps to ensure that such records are stored in a secure location and are not available to others who are not authorized to have access.

Confidentiality is a crucial element of the social work profession, particularly regarding the use of technology. Therefore, social workers must recognize and understand their ethical and legal obligation to maintain client confidentiality in all forms of service provision. When conducting telehealth services online at home, family members in both the social worker and client household are susceptible to overhearing sensitive, personal conversations. It is ample to be mindful of these risks and engage clients in discussions regarding confidentiality.

Social workers are responsible for properly storing and disposing of files, openly discussing confidentiality with their clients, and utilizing secure means of communication. Furthermore, when using electronic forms of documentation or information collection (e.g., laptop), social workers must develop risk management strategies (e.g., computer passwords, back up files, so on).

Additionally, 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. When records are stored using technological means, social workers must maintain the confidentiality of the information that is contained in the file and store/dispose of physical or electronic copies in a way that protects client confidentiality. Members employed by an organization must 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. In any case, 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.

As mentioned by the NASW, “social workers who provide electronic services should develop protocols and policies to protect client confidentiality. They should use encryption software and firewalls and periodically assess confidentiality policies and procedures to ensure compliance with statutes, regulations, and social work standards” (2017, p. 17). According to the NBASW Code of Ethics (2007), it is imperative that “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 and where this information will be shared with third parties. Social workers only disclose confidential information to other parties with the informed consent of clients, client’s legally authorized representatives or when required by law or court order.” Moreover, social workers should always respect confidentiality and should not share confidential information about clients, employers, or colleagues.

ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS IN PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

It is the responsibility of social workers to establish appropriate boundaries with current and previous clients. The NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) speaks to ethical responsibilities in professional relationships as it relates to boundaries, conflicts of interest, and dual relationships. Therefore, social workers are obligated to ensure that the professional relationship serves the needs of their clients, maintain appropriate professional boundaries, and consider whether these boundaries are challenged when using technology and social media.

2.1 Appropriate Professional Boundaries

2.1.1 Social workers shall maintain appropriate professional boundaries throughout the course of the professional relationship and after the professional relationship.

As with in-person service delivery, social workers who provide telehealth services must maintain clear boundaries. Aside from employing personal-professional boundaries to secure a healthy

work-life balance, at the earliest opportunity, social workers must develop professional boundaries with their clientele. These boundaries may include distinguishing work hours, responsible ways of communication, and safeguarding social networking profiles. Boundaries are particularly pertinent regarding the use of social media platforms. Therefore, social workers must adopt appropriate measures to ensure their clients do not have access to their social networking sites to avoid inappropriate dual relationships, conflicts of interest, and boundary confusion. Social workers must be mindful of what they post on their profiles as it could negatively affect their professional relationships and image of the profession. Moreover, social workers are not permitted to share confidential or identifying information about their clients on social media. Confidentiality and client privacy can be compromised when social workers and their clients engage with one another on social media, as it allows others to see connections and make assumptions.

2.3 Declare Conflicts of Interest

2.3.1 Social workers shall avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgment.

Furthermore, social workers must be aware of the impact of social media in developing conflicts of interest. Therefore, the NBASW strongly cautions social workers against searching or accepting friend requests from current or former clients. Doing so puts them at risk of seeing information that was not disclosed within the professional relationship and could result in a conflict of interest or biased assumptions concerning their clients, as well as a potential violation of professional boundaries.

If questioning whether or not to accept a friend request from or interact with a current or former client on any social networking platform, social workers must reflect on these ethical obligations and ask themselves the following questions:

- Have I set clear boundaries with my client?
- Does my code of ethics, standard of practice or organizational policy provide guidance or direction?
- What is the intention behind the request?
- Is accepting a friend request appropriate?
- Accepting such a request, will this send mixed emotions? Will this imply a personal relationship?
- By accepting a friend request from a current or former client, will it compromise confidentiality and blur the boundaries of your working relationship?

- In my use of social media, am I creating a blend between my personal and professional life?

2.4 Dual and Multiple Relationships

2.4.1 Social workers shall take care to evaluate the nature of dual or multiple relationships to ensure that the needs and welfare of their clients are protected.

Connecting with clients on social media platforms blurs the line between professional and personal relationships. In addition to potentially breaching professional boundaries, it may confuse the clients about whether or not this is a social relationship or professional relationship. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to avoid engaging in multiple and dual-relationships. Moreover, ethical standards relating to boundaries, dual-relationships, privacy, and confidentiality are certainly standards that should guide social workers in their use of technology and potential acceptance of a friend request.

In the case that professional boundaries and the nature of the working relationship need reiteration due to a social media friend request, social workers may politely decline and explain their workplace policies and professional boundaries regarding social media and the use of technology.

ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS TO COLLEAGUES

As a profession, social work encourages collaborative team-work, and thus requires ethics aimed at regulating these interactions. The NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007), illustrates ethical obligations regarding professional relationships with colleagues, supervisors, and educators. However, the next section will focus on the role of technology in education and the supervision of students. The NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) also addresses the ethical responsibilities of social workers who supervise students (e.g., field instructors, educators). Specifically, the guidelines state:

3.5 Obligations to Students

3.5.1 Social worker educators and field instructors shall follow the principles of the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice in their work with students.

3.5.2 Social work educators and field instructors shall provide instruction only within their areas of knowledge and competence.



3.5.3 Social worker educators and field instructors shall adhere to the principles of privacy and confidentiality in the supervisory relationship, acknowledging with students any limitations early in the professional relationship.

3.5.8 Social work educators and field instructors shall be responsible for setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries.

When using technology for coursework and supervision, social work educators and supervisors must be mindful of limitations with technology such as internet connection, possible technology failure, and the risks of using unsafe platforms. Moreover, supervisors and educators are required to respect the professional boundaries of their students (refer to section 2.1, 2.3, and 2.4), and must employ the NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) in their practice. Additionally, supervisors and educators must use platforms that are secure and obtain the knowledge and skills required to use technology in a safe, competent, and ethical manner. Lastly, social workers who supervise students have a responsibility to engage students in learning about the ethical issues pertaining to the use of technology, to foster critical analysis, and assist students in navigating the complexities and developing risk management strategies that are in keeping with best-practice standards.

ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Social work professionals are qualified to work in a wide variety of sectors and are responsible for adhering to workplace policies, as well as professional ethics, standards, and guidelines. This requirement applies when delivering telehealth services and using technology. Notably, the NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) declares:

4.1 Professional Practice

4.1.1 Social workers shall acknowledge and strive to carry out the stated aims and objectives of their employer, agency or service contractor, consistent with the requirement of ethical practice.

4.1.4 Social workers shall work toward the best possible standards of service and shall be accountable for their practice.



Before providing electronic social work services to clients outside of New Brunswick, social workers must register in each jurisdiction they provide social work services. 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 understands and has met the registration requirements to practice within their client's place of residence. Social workers must also be familiar with and adhere to the ethical obligations, policies, standards, and guidelines of each jurisdiction in which they practice social work. Moreover, as stated by the NASW (2017), "Social workers who provide social work services using technology shall understand, comply, and stay current with any and all laws that govern the provision of social work services and inform clients of the social worker's legal obligations, just as they would when providing services in person (p. 16)."

4.2 Obligations of Managers

4.2.6 Social workers in management or similar administrative positions shall strive to facilitate access for staff under their direction to ongoing training and professional education, and advocate for adequate resources to meet staff development needs.

The NBASW encourages social workers occupying managerial positions to provide employees with secure means of telecommunication and ensure employees receive training in the telecommunication platform(s) to ensure they can use it comfortably and effectively while maintaining high-security standards.

5.1 Insurance

5.1.1 Social workers in private practice shall maintain adequate malpractice, defamation and liability insurance.

In accordance with the NBASW (2007) Code of Ethics, social workers in private practice must maintain adequate malpractice, defamation, and liability insurance. Members who are not in private practice are encouraged to ask their employer if they already have liability insurance to protect their staff before pursuing coverage elsewhere. Furthermore, regarding telehealth services, the NBASW encourages all members who are incorporating the use of technology into their social work practice to have professional liability insurance policy that adequately covers the provision of electronic social work services. The CASW liability insurance program offers a full range of coverage options that are specifically designed to meet practice risk needs, such as E-Services, coverage, and Cyber Security Liability & Privacy Liability Breach coverage.



ETHICAL OBLIGATION TO THE PROFESSION

In order for social workers to adhere to the core values and principles of the profession, they must maintain ethical obligations. The NBASW Code of Ethics (2007) affirms:

7.1 Maintain and Enhance the Reputation of the Profession

7.1.2 Social workers shall uphold the dignity and integrity of the profession and inform their practice from a recognized social work knowledge base.

7.14 Social workers shall identify and describe education, training, experience, professional affiliations, competence, and nature of service in an honest and accurate manner.

7.1.7 Social workers shall have, maintain and endeavor periodically to update an acceptable level of knowledge and skill and shall comply with provincial regulations for continuing education.

7.1.9 Social workers shall strive to promote the profession of social work, its process and outcomes and defend the profession against unjust criticism.

7.1.10 Social workers shall distinguish between actions and statements made as private citizens and actions and statements made as social workers and shall ensure that no outside interest brings the profession into disrepute.

Reputation and upholding ethical standards are two key principles of the social work profession. Social workers must remember that social media activity and behavior on their personal profile(s) reflects on them and their professional integrity. The NBASW cautions social workers against posting violent, graphic, or offensive images or texts and engaging in name-calling or behavior that will reflect negatively on themselves, their clients, colleagues, employers, and the profession. Social workers are held accountable for what they post on social media.

Social workers are to adequately distinguish between statements made on personal platforms and those used for professional purposes. Moreover, social workers shall ensure that educational

degrees, training, experience, and professional affiliations are conveyed accurately on social media and websites used for professional purposes. Additionally, social workers should not post misleading or inaccurate information about themselves, their qualifications, their work experience, or their achievements. Social workers shall make reasonable efforts to ensure that content shared on professional social media websites is accurate, adheres to the values and standards of the profession, remains consistent with the NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007), is evidence-based, and comes from a reputable source.

Lastly, social workers shall take advantage of technology availability (e.g., webinars, online courses) to increase their knowledge and skill levels, thereby helping them to comply with provincial regulations for continuing education. These ethical guidelines are essential as technology and telecommunication continuously evolves, and more methods of service provision and corresponding educational opportunities progress.

7.2 Unethical Practice of Colleagues

7.2.1 Social workers who have ethical concerns about the actions of a colleague shall take appropriate action conducting themselves in a manner that is consistent with the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of their regulatory body.

7.2.2 Social workers shall report to the appropriate regulatory body any breach of the code by another social worker which adversely affects or harms a client or prevents the effective delivery of a social work service.

7.3 Support of Regulatory Practice

7.3.1 Social workers shall co-operate with investigations of complaints against themselves or other social workers and shall comply with the requirements of any associated disciplinary procedures.

As mentioned in the NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007), if a social worker has knowledge or concern about a colleague using technology in an unethical manner or breach of the Code, they are required to report to the appropriate regulatory body and comply with the investigation. Moreover, if they are involved in a complaint, social workers shall cooperate and provide the information necessary for the complaints process.

RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

With awareness and caution, social workers can avoid encountering ethical risks related to telehealth service delivery, the use of technology, and social work practice. The following steps are intended for social workers to minimize risk when using technology:

Consultation – Social workers should engage in open dialogue and subsequent discussion with colleagues, supervisors, and employers regarding the ethical challenges accompanying the use of technology and corresponding strategies to mitigate the risk that is in the best interests of clients while maintaining ethical standards.

Informed Consent – During the process of developing appropriate boundaries, social workers are required to discuss with their clients the nature of the service and should first consider client's abilities and needs to determine clients' suitability or capacity to both provide informed consent for the use of technology and benefit from this modality of service delivery. Following this, social workers must inform clients about their professional social media policy. This conversation should take place at the beginning of the social work relationship to ensure clients understand and agree to the services and boundaries discussed.

Privacy & Confidentiality – Social workers must be mindful of the fact that information shared through social media platforms does become part of the public domain and can easily be accessed by those with internet access. It is the responsibility of social work professionals to ensure that client information is kept private and confidential. Social workers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with workplace policies and legislation governing privacy within the jurisdictions in which they practice.

The NBASW urges social workers not to post anything about current or former clients unless the individual has permitted and has provided written consent. Social workers must be aware that sharing client information, even without a specific identifier, could result in a breach of confidentiality and may lead to the identification of the client.

Policies & Guidelines – It is the responsibility of social work professionals to become familiar with the relevant workplace and provincial professional standards and guidelines, particularly those which address the use of technology and telehealth service provision. It is vital to contribute to the development of these standards where they do not exist and advocate for adjustments that meet the needs of all service user populations.



Social Media Operations – To mitigate risk, social work professionals are encouraged to become familiar with the operational policies of social media sites and ensure their privacy settings are secure. It is also extremely important to become familiar with workplace policies. Apart from regular business practices, social workers must be aware that interacting with clients or former clients on social media may breach professional boundaries and is a conflict of interest. As stated by the NASW (2017), “Social workers should obtain consent before conducting an electronic search on the client. Exceptions may arise when the search is for purposes of protecting client or other people from serious, foreseeable, and imminent harm or for other compelling professional reasons.” Social workers who violate professional boundaries may form the basis of a complaint and may face employment consequences such as suspension or termination.

Remember: Online communication or posts are not private and are accessible beyond the recipient. Social workers must recognize that information sent to an intended recipient is at risk of becoming disseminated amongst others. Technology may not always be a secure form of communication.

Documentation – It is critical to document conversations with clients about social media policies and the resolution of ethical dilemmas (e.g., the response to a friend request from a client). Social workers are advised to document this information within a service users file.

Models for Ethical Decision-Making – Social work professionals may use several ethical decision-making models when resolving ethical dilemmas in practice and are therefore encouraged to explore these models within the context of telehealth services, the use of technology, and social work practice. For more information visit: nbasw-attsnb.ca

Continuing Professional Education – Social work professionals should engage in professional development opportunities that explore boundaries in social work practice and foster ongoing critical reflection.

Explore Your Online Identity – It is vital to discover what information may be available about oneself online by periodically engaging in an internet search using a variety of different search engines (e.g., Google search). Notably, the information found while completing these searches is also accessible by clients and supervisors. In the case where there is a discrepancy between the information available online and the portrayal of one in professional life, it is crucial to reconsider the content you post. Social workers must be aware that information deleted or no longer accessible, remains on the internet indefinitely and can always be retrievable.



Develop Personal Risk Management Guidelines – To maintain the core values and principles put forward within the NBASW *Code of Ethics* (2007), developing personal boundaries, standards, and guidelines that adequately reflect the profession is crucial. Social work is a continuously evolving profession, and therefore social workers must continue to explore the use of technology within an ethical framework. As professionals, mindfulness, critical self-reflection, and research are all beneficial in avoiding ethical dilemmas, particularly regarding technology.

Be Accountable – Social workers are responsible for their personal and professional use of technology, and the ongoing development of knowledge regarding social work practice and the use of technology. It is recommended that when using a social media platform, social workers familiarize themselves with its user’s agreement, privacy policy, and settings.

Privacy Settings – Social workers must become acquainted with the privacy controls on the social media platforms they use and ensure that the general public cannot see personal details of their life. It is essential to fully understand the difference between privacy settings for each social media platform (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). Additionally, the NBASW encourages social workers to ensure that all privacy settings are at the highest level and to take additional security measures, including changing personal passwords every six months.

CONCLUSION

This document outlines some of the ethical considerations and best practices regarding telehealth service delivery, the use of technology, and social work practice. As previously mentioned, the use of technology is becoming increasingly prevalent within society, particularly social work practice, as telecommunications systems continuously improve and become more accessible. Social workers must use technology appropriately, both personally and professionally, while exercising ethical decision-making. As with the majority of ethical issues, there are rarely direct answers as it pertains to social media use. Thereby, the *NBASW Standards Regarding Telehealth Services, the Use of Technology and Social Work Practice* has been developed to guide social workers through their use of technology and optimizing telehealth service delivery, while exploring ethical challenges and considerations and highlighting best practices which are grounded in the NBASW Code of Ethics (2007).

TIPS

- Be aware.
- Think before you post.
- Consider who can see what you share.
- Acknowledge that your social media activity and behaviours reflect both your personal and the social work professions integrity.
- Enforce and maintain appropriate professional boundaries.
- Do not post information containing any identifying information of a current or former client, unless you have their permission.
- Do not post inappropriate or offensive content.
- If you are employed, follow your employer's social media policy.
- When in doubt, get advice.
- Always act in the best interest of the client.

Social workers must use their professional judgment on an ongoing basis. By being careful and conscientious, social workers may enjoy the personal and professional benefits of technology while adhering to the *NBASW Code of Ethics (2007)*, standards and guidelines, and specific workplace policies. This process requires members to remain ethical, vigilant, and to be competent in the technology used to provide telehealth services. Furthermore, the NBASW encourages members to continue enhancing their knowledge and skills in social media and telecommunication.



GLOSSARY

This glossary includes definitions of key terms used within the present document that are considered relevant to the practice standards regarding telehealth services, the use of technology, and social work practice.

CLIENT refers to the individual, couple, family, group, organization, or community that seeks or is provided social work services from an individual or organization.

ELECTRONIC SOCIAL WORK SERVICES refers to the use of computers (including the Internet, social media, online chat, text, and email) and other electronic means (such as cell phones, tablets, landline telephones, and video technology) to (a) provide information to the public, (b) deliver social work services to clients, (c) communicate with clients, (d) manage confidential information and case records, (e) store and access information about clients, and (f) arrange payment for professional services.

TECHNOLOGY encompasses any electronic device or program that is used to communicate, gather, store, analyze, or share information. This may include computers, phones, tablets, monitors, smartwatches, websites, social networking applications, and computer software.

TELECOMMUNICATION refers to any form of communication that takes place via telephone, cable, telegraph, broadcasting, or internet.

TELEHEALTH SERVICES refer to an aspect of electronic social work services, in which social work professionals provide direct services to clients via technology.

SECURITY refers to the protection of hardware, software, and confidential data through physical and electronic forms of protection.

SOCIAL MEDIA refers to any web-based platform where users interact and share information. Social media sites include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, blogs, YouTube, LinkedIn, etc.

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