



**THE NEW BRUNSWICK
ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

**STANDARDS FOR THE USE OF
TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

2010

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Acknowledgements

The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) wishes to thank the National Association of Social Workers and the Association of Social Work Boards for permission to use their document *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* as a resource from which most of the content of this document was extracted. The NBASW also recognizes with great appreciation the work that went into developing this valuable resource.

All direct quotes, of which there are many, have been footnoted, as well as all sections that have essentially the same intent. The format for the document also reflects the format used in the above noted document.

Most changes were made to reflect the Canadian, and more specifically the New Brunswick reality, both as they relate to terminology and content.

Preface

The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers has developed *Standards for The Use of Technology in Social Work Practice* to provide standards to social workers in New Brunswick who may be using technology, such as e-mail, the internet and web based counseling, video and teleconference, telephone, and any other electronic means of communication.

Technology has changed social work practice, offering new ways to perform services and obtain information. The challenges that it brings require a special set of skills and knowledge to provide the best practice available.¹

These standards apply to the use of technology as an adjunct to practice, as well as practice that is exclusively conducted with technology. The *National Association of Social Workers and Association of Social Work Boards Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* and the *NBASW Code of Ethics 2007* served as foundation documents in developing these standards.

The specific goals of the standards are:

- to maintain and improve the quality of technology-related services provided by social workers
- to serve as a framework to social workers incorporating technology into their services
- to help social workers monitor and evaluate the ways technology is used in their services
- to inform clients, employers, insurance carriers, and others about professional standards for the use of technology in the provision of social work services.²

¹ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p.4

² Ibid, p. 4

Introduction

Technology, when used in these standards, is defined as *any electronic tool or medium, including the telephone, used in the conduct and ethical delivery of social work services. In the broadest sense, information technology refers to both hardware and software that are used to store, retrieve and manipulate information.*

The past two decades have witnessed an immense expansion of the use of technology in social work practice. This expansion has affected nearly every area of the profession:

- at the individual practitioner level, e-mail and the Web make Internet direct practice possible on a global scale;
- social workers and clients use Web-based sources for information that can enhance the likelihood of effective interventions;
- on-line support groups are being created and moderated;
- at the agency level, case management programs are generating reports, tracking personnel, automating billing, forecasting budgets;
- global-level consultation and conference abilities are available;
- emerging geographic information systems are pinpointing community assets and needs.³

As a result, the roles for social workers are changing and they need to adjust to new demands for practice in the information age. Social workers should acquire adequate skills in order to use technology appropriately, and to adapt current practice protocols to ensure competent and ethical practice.

Social workers need to develop an awareness and understanding of the potential risks in

- the use of technology to provide services to clients;
- the storage of client information;
- the use of web-based assessment tools;
- the provision of e-therapy;
- the provision of on-line support groups; and,
- any other such uses.

If necessary, please seek clarification from the New Brunswick Association of Social Workers.

³ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 6

Cautionary Note

Members of the NBASW should be aware that the use of technology, while admittedly providing numerous benefits to the profession of Social Work, should always be utilized with caution and with the best interests of the client as the foremost consideration.

One key concern pertains to the worker's relationship with the client. There are definite changes in the relationship when utilizing interventions that do not involve personal contact (e.g., services provided on-line [through chat rooms], or the use of messaging [e-mail, Facebook, MSN]).

Signs of attitude, emotional state, and distress can be missed without visual or auditory cues. It continues to be the responsibility of the Social Worker to ensure that the provision of service is conducted in a responsible manner and this may require personal contact.

The potential for harm or abuse of people can be increased by the use of technology in social work practice. It is the responsibility of social workers to make every effort to ensure that the use of technology conforms to all practice and regulatory standards addressing ethical conduct and protection of the public.⁴

⁴ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 7

Standard 1. Ethics and Values

Social workers providing services via electronic means including the use of the telephone shall act in accordance with the current *NBASW Code of Ethics*, and shall uphold the values of the profession.⁵

Interpretation

Social workers are guided by the profession's values and principles as articulated in the *New Brunswick Association of Social Workers Statement of Values and Principles*, a subsection of the *NBASW Code of Ethics 2007*. Social workers should ensure that all services conform to practice and regulatory standards which address ethical conduct and protection of the public. These include the *NBASW Association of Social Workers Act, 1988*, the *NBASW Code of Ethics 2007*, and the NBASW Standards and Guidelines.

⁵ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 7

Standard 2. Access to Technology and Related Competencies

Social workers who have access to and use technology in their practice shall be responsible for becoming proficient in the technological skills and tools required for competent and ethical practice; for seeking appropriate training and consultation to stay current with emerging technologies; and for having the appropriate technology and support systems to ensure competent practice.⁶

Interpretation

Social workers should ensure that adequate risk-reduction precautions are in place that will protect clients.⁷ (Refer to Standard 6 in this document)

Adequate technical and policy supports including privacy and security procedures, protocols, and technologies should be in place to ensure protection of clients and social workers.

Records should be accurate and reflect the standard of care provided. It is particularly important when providing services using electronic means to document client authorization for disclosure and informed consent. Agreement in regards to key issues such as communication guidelines (ex., when, how, and for what purposes e-mails will be used), security mechanisms (encryption, firewalls and pass codes), and fees for service should be addressed and documented.

⁶ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 8 & 9

⁷ Ibid, p. 8

Standard 3. Clinical Competencies

Social workers shall strive to become and remain knowledgeable about the dynamics, the advantages and drawbacks of technology-based interactions and the ways in which technology-based social work practice can be safely and appropriately conducted.⁸

Interpretation

Social workers should fully evaluate potential clients for appropriateness for social work interventions, and if it is determined that technology-based methods would be appropriate, the social worker should provide the best assessments and interventions possible.⁹

Social workers should take responsibility for keeping current with emerging knowledge, review professional literature, and participate in continuing education relevant to technology-based clinical practice. The social worker should provide a contingency plan for clinical emergencies and technology failures¹⁰ and best practice would dictate that this be available in writing and provided to the client.

⁸ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 18

⁹ Ibid, p. 18

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 18

Standard 4. Regulatory Competencies

Social workers who use electronic means including the telephone to provide service shall abide by all regulations of their professional practice, with the understanding that their practice may be subject to regulation in both the jurisdiction in which the client receives services as well as the jurisdiction in which the social worker provides services.¹¹

Interpretation

Social workers should understand that in some jurisdictions, the delivery of services is deemed to take place at the location of the client. It is the social worker's responsibility to contact the regulatory boards of intent to provide services and find out what requirements are necessary to provide services legally in those jurisdictions.¹² This could include a requirement to register in the jurisdiction where the client is located.

¹¹ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 11

¹² Ibid, p. 11

Standard 5. Identification and Verification

Social workers who use electronic means including the telephone to provide services shall represent themselves to the public with accuracy and make reasonable efforts to verify client identity and contact information.¹³

Interpretation

Social workers should advertise and perform only those services they are trained to provide. The anonymity of electronic communication makes misrepresentation possible for both social workers and consumers of social work services. Because of the potential misuse by unqualified individuals, it is essential that information be readily verifiable to ensure client protection. Web sites should provide links to all appropriate licensing bodies to facilitate verification. Social workers need to provide their full name, credentials, registration information, office address and phone number, and secure e-mail address.¹⁴

In some settings and unique circumstances, verifying client identity may not be appropriate or necessary. One such situation would be when client anonymity is an element of the service (eg. crisis line).

¹³ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 12

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 12

Standard 6. Privacy, Confidentiality, Documentation and Security

Social workers shall protect client privacy when using technology in their practice and document all services, taking special safeguards to protect client information in the electronic record¹⁵ and/or paper record. Social workers shall be responsible to explain confidentiality and its limits as well as file maintenance procedures to their clients.

Interpretation

As early as possible, social workers should provide clients with information on the use of technology in service delivery. Social workers should advise clients of privacy practices and obtain any authorizations for information disclosure and consent for treatment or services. Social workers should be aware of privacy risks involved when using wireless devices and other technological innovations and take proper steps to protect client privacy.¹⁶ Social workers should make sure that clients are aware of these risks.

Social workers should be aware of and adhere to the privacy and security standards of applicable laws within the respective jurisdiction¹⁷ (jurisdiction where the practitioner is located and from where he/she is providing the services as well as the jurisdiction where the client is located).

Social workers should give special attention to documenting services performed via the Internet and other technologies. They should be familiar with and abide by applicable laws and standards of regulatory bodies, third-party payers, and accreditation bodies that may dictate documentation requirements. All practice activities should be documented and maintained in a safe, secure file with safeguards for electronic and paper records.¹⁸

Procedures for the transferal and disposal of client files must also ensure that confidentiality is maintained.

¹⁵ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 13

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 13

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 13

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 13

Standard 7. Advocacy and Social Action

If social workers use technology for advocacy and social action purposes, they shall use it to collaborate with communities in efforts to benefit individuals and groups, and seek to provide tools, opportunities, and information so that clients are able to advocate directly for their own interests.¹⁹

Interpretation

Social work has a rich tradition of both collective advocacy for social change and case advocacy to improve the services provided to an individual, family, group, organization, or community. Various technologies are increasingly being used to monitor legislative and regulatory activities, to communicate political messages, and to mobilize citizens to take action. The Internet has become a powerful tool to access information about public policy and to communicate quickly to large numbers of coalition partners and individual activists. Citizens can communicate instantaneously with elected officials through e-mail and Fax, promoting civic participation. A social worker, using Internet resources, can more easily assist clients in navigating systems of care. In addition to informational resources, social workers can assist clients by using online application processes and services, and by providing access to support networks.²⁰

¹⁹ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 15

²⁰ Ibid, p. 15

Standard 8. Research

Social workers conducting, evaluating, disseminating or implementing research using technological approaches shall do so in a manner that ensures ethical credibility and ensures the informed consent of the participant.²¹

Interpretation

Chapter 6 of the *NBASW Code of Ethics 2007* provides guidelines for conducting, evaluating, disseminating and implementing research in practice. When engaging in electronically mediated research such as survey research on the Web or other electronic inquiries, participant-related safeguards should be applied. Review procedures should be followed rigorously to protect participants from harm and to monitor informed consent protocols.²²

When using research, gained from electronic sources, the social worker has the obligation to evaluate the credibility and limitations of the research. This includes establishing and verifying authorship and sponsorship; the credentials and competencies of the researchers; the reliability, validity, trustworthiness and limitations of the research; and the accuracy of the reported findings or results. Social workers should carefully consider research based on these dimensions, and if doubt arises on any of them, then the social worker should use the information with caution, if at all.²³

²¹ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 19

²² Ibid, p. 19

²³ Ibid, p. 19

Standard 9. Supervision

When using or providing supervision and consultation by technological means, social work supervisors and supervisees shall follow the standards that would be applied in a face-to-face supervisory relationship and shall be competent in the technologies used.²⁴

Interpretation

Best practice would involve retaining a qualified supervisor or consultant for technology concerns that may arise. Proper training should be obtained by all social workers providing supervision via technology in order to become familiar with the technologies being used.²⁵

As with all supervisor-supervisee relationships, the supervisor may share the responsibility for services provided and may be held liable for negligent or inadequate practice by a supervisee.²⁶

Refer to section 3.4 of the *NBASW Code of Ethics 2007*.

²⁴ National Association of Social Workers, & Association of Social Work Boards. (2005). *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice*, p. 20

²⁵ Ibid, p. 20

²⁶ Ibid, p. 20

Glossary of Terms

Client: A person, family, group or persons, incorporated body, association or community on whose behalf a social worker provides or agrees to provide a service or to whom the social worker is legally obligated to provide a service. (*CASW Code of Ethics 2005*)

Competency: The knowledge, skills, and abilities of the social worker to provide the service.

Confidentiality: A professional value that demands that professionally acquired information be kept private and not shared with third parties unless the client provides informed consent or a professional or legal obligation exists to share such information without client informed consent (*CASW Code of Ethics 2005*).

Electronic: A mode of communication and information acquisition, transmission, and storage, such as computers, telephones, cell phones, personal digital assistants, facsimile machines and storage devices. (*NASW and ASWB Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice 2005, p.22*)

Informed Consent: An agreement reached voluntarily by a competent client after discussion as to foreseeable risks and benefits associated with the disclosure of confidential information. (*NBASW Code of Ethics 2007*)

Privacy: The right of an individual to withhold her/his information from public scrutiny or unwanted publicity. (*NASW and ASWB Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice 2005, p.22*)

Security: The protection of hardware, software, and data by locks, doors, and other electronic barriers such as passwords, firewalls, and encryption. (*NASW and ASWB Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice 2005, p. 22*)

Technology: any electronic tool or medium, including the telephone, used in the conduct and ethical delivery of social work services. In the broadest sense, information technology refers to both hardware and software that are used to store, retrieve and manipulate information (Website definition)

References

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