

SINGAPORE ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS CODE OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

PREAMBLE

The Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW) has the responsibility of promoting the quality and effectiveness of social work in Singapore. The Code of Professional Ethics (Code) applies to social workers who practise in Singapore. Social workers are expected to abide by the Code, and take cognisance of their employing organisation's policies and code of practice, as well as the relevant laws and legislations in Singapore, in their day-to-day professional conduct. The Code reflects the values, defines the principles, and sets the standards for all social work practice in Singapore.

Ethical dilemmas are inherent and inevitable in social work practice. When they do arise, social workers are expected to use appropriate tools in ethical decision-making and undertake professional consultation and supervision in resolving conflicts.

SASW will review the ethical conduct of its members when alerted on alleged violations of the Code.

SOCIAL WORK MISSION

The social work profession is based on the belief in the value and dignity of all human beings, and a concern for their well-being. The profession pays particular attention to the needs of people who are in poverty, are vulnerable, and/or experiencing oppression. Social workers consider the person in his/her environment – focusing on the individual and family, as well as the environmental and societal factors that hinder the client's well-being. Social work is dedicated to enhancing the lives of human beings through the provision and development of appropriate services, and the promotion of social planning and action.

SIX CORE VALUES OF THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

SASW adopts and subscribes to the following six core values of the profession (NASW, 2008), which serve as the foundation of the social work mission. The ethical principles of the social work profession are distilled from these values.

1. Service to Humanity

Social workers put service to others above self-interest.

2. Social Justice

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with, and on behalf of, vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people.

3. Dignity and Worth of the Person

Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful manner, mindful of individual differences, and cultural and ethnic diversity.

4. Importance of Human Relationships

Social workers understand that relationships between, and among people are an important vehicle for change.

5. Integrity

Social workers act honestly and responsibly, in accordance to the profession's mission, values and ethical principles.

6. Competence

Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills, and to apply them in practice.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES: RESPONSIBILITIES

The core values of social work are embedded in the following ethical responsibilities, which are relevant to the professional activities of social workers. They include social workers' responsibility to

- a) clients,
- b) colleagues,
- c) practice settings,
- d) the social work profession, and
- e) society.

A. SOCIAL WORKERS' ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY TO CLIENTS

1. Non-Discriminatory Practice

- a. Social workers shall avoid discrimination and prejudice, respect individual differences and accept that professional responsibility must take precedence over personal aims and views.
- b. Social workers recognise diversity within and among cultural groups, and the differences in the individual, family, group and community. Social workers strive to ensure a culturally sensitive practice which acknowledges all religions, cultures, races, nationalities, political beliefs, sexual orientations, age groups, gender identities, marital statuses, and mental and physical abilities.

2. Client Self Determination and Autonomy

- a. Social workers respect and promote clients' rights to make their own decisions. Social workers support them in working through their own problems within the scope of their own resources, and having due regard to their personal well-being.
- b. Social workers affirm the clients' right to self-determination and autonomy and actively seek to enable them to make informed decisions.
- c. Social workers support clients' self-determination and autonomy, except in situations where, in the social worker's professional judgement, the clients' actions or potential actions pose a serious, foreseeable or imminent risk to themselves and others.
- d. Social workers affirm that every person has the right to access social services. This means ensuring:
 - i. that the client is able to communicate in a manner comfortable to him/her.
 - ii. an atmosphere that respects all religions and cultures, race, and nationality regardless of political belief, sexual orientation, age, gender identity, marital status, and mental and physical abilities.
- e. Social workers use clear and respectful language in all communications to, and about clients.

3. Informed Consent

- a. Social workers shall inform clients clearly about the obligations and possible consequences of the services provided to them.
- b. Social workers shall communicate the obligations and consequences in a language and manner that is clear, and easy to understand by the clients.
- c. For involuntary clients, social workers shall inform them of their rights, and the limits of their rights, to ensure that clients retain as much autonomy as possible.
- d. Where the client is a minor, or is unable to give consent for physical, mental or emotional reasons, social workers shall seek the consent of a responsible adult (legal guardian/donee/appointed deputy) who plays a significant role in the client's life. Notwithstanding this, social workers shall take steps to obtain assent of such clients as far as possible to safeguard their interests and rights.

4. Continuity of Services

- a. Social workers take responsibility to ensure that services are continued in situations where services are disrupted by any circumstances (e.g. leave of absence, emergencies, transfer, resignation or termination of employment).

5. Professional Boundaries with Clients

a. Close Personal relationships

- i. Social workers shall not, under any circumstances, engage in close personal relationships with their clients. This includes sexual activities or sexual contact with clients, whether such contact is consensual or otherwise. This principle applies also to:
 1. Clients' relatives

2. Other individuals with whom the clients maintain close personal relationships, and
 3. Any other individuals where there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the clients.
- ii. In circumstances where any such relationship is considered with former clients, their relatives and significant others, it is incumbent on the social worker to prove that there is neither exploitation nor harm. Hence, it is essential that the social worker undertakes professional consultation and supervision to address issues relating to authority, power and exploitation.
 - iii. Social workers shall not engage in a professional relationship with clients with whom they have had a prior sexual relationship.

b. Sexual Harassment

- i. Social workers shall not engage in sexual harassment of the client. Sexual harassment includes sexual advances, sexual solicitation, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

c. Physical Contact

- i. Social workers shall not engage in physical contact with clients where there is a possibility of harm to the clients because of the contact.

d. Conflicts of Interest

- i. Social workers shall avoid conflicts of interests, or dual/multiple relationships with clients that may interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgement.
- ii. Social workers shall inform clients, supervisors, and/or the organisation when there are potential conflicts of interests. Steps shall be taken to resolve the issue in a manner that protects the clients' interests.

e. Giving and Accepting of Gifts

- i. Social workers shall reflect on the ethical considerations and cultural norms when giving or accepting gifts within the professional context. The decision on whether to give or accept a gift shall be made with appropriate consultation with supervisors and peers and with reference to the organisation's policies.
- ii. Social workers shall not give or accept gifts from clients that may influence their professional judgement and relationship.

f. Electronic Technology

- i. Social workers shall do no harm when using electronic technology (e.g. social networking sites, online chats and counselling, text and video messages) to communicate with clients.
- ii. When communicating with clients through digital and other electronic technology, social workers shall do so for professional purposes only, and with the clients' consent.

- iii. Social workers shall take reasonable steps to prevent clients' access to their personal social networking sites to avoid boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships. Steps may include the setting up of a separate social media site or website to communicate with clients.
- iv. Social workers shall inform clients on the potential risks and adverse consequences associated with the disclosure of confidential information on the internet, and on social media, text messaging, and video conferencing sites and applications.

6. Privacy and Confidentiality

- a. Social workers respect and safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of clients by using information given and received responsibly. Responsible management of data is also subjected to the Personal Data Protection Commission's Advisory Guidelines for the Social Service Sector.
- b. Social workers shall exercise care, and avoid unnecessary intrusion on the clients' privacy when seeking information.
- c. Social workers shall not discuss or talk about their clients outside the professional context and in public spaces and areas.
- d. Social workers shall seek client's consent if information relating to the client needs to be shared. Social workers shall ensure that when sharing information, care must be taken to share only what is necessary to address the client's needs and still fulfil the information requirements of the receiving service provider.

7. Client Records

- a. Client records include all forms of documentation, photographs, and/or video and audio recordings. When taking and using photographs, video and audio recordings of clients, prior consent from the client must be obtained.
- b. Social workers shall take steps to ensure that documentation of records accurately reflect the information obtained, and the services provided to the client. Documentation shall be timely so as to contribute effectively to the delivery and continuity of services to the client. Social workers shall comply with organisational requirements for record-keeping, documentation and data collection.
- c. Social workers shall refrain from the use of emotive or derogatory language in their documentation.
- d. Social workers shall use proper safeguards to protect their client's confidential information when sharing information digitally. This may include encryption, password protection, and setting up of secure firewalls to protect stored confidential information.
- e. Social workers shall ensure that names and other sensitive personal information of clients are removed before they are being used for publicity, training or other educational purposes, unless the clients' consent has been obtained for the specified purpose.
- f. Social workers shall protect clients' records by ensuring secure and appropriate storage, and retention as determined by the organisation's policies. When destroying any form of records, steps must be taken to ensure that no identifiable evidence is traceable or left behind.

B. SOCIAL WORKERS' ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY TO COLLEAGUES

The term “colleagues” in this section shall include personnel within and outside of the organisation - fellow workers, students, supervisors, supervisees, volunteers, grassroots personnel, or others - directly involved in a professional relationship with the social worker.

1. Importance of Human Relationships

- a. Social workers recognise that effective service depends on co-operation among professional disciplines and others with due regard to the respective areas of competence.
- b. Social workers work towards actively, and respectfully resolving conflict with colleagues.

2. Respect

Social workers treat, with respect, the professional judgement, statements and actions of colleagues.

3. Service Provision

- a. Social workers, when referring clients to other professionals, shall take steps to facilitate an orderly transfer of responsibility, and disclose all pertinent information to the new service providers with the clients' consent.
- b. Social workers shall be aware of the parameters of their own authority and expertise (and that of other professionals), when working or consulting with other professional disciplines. This will optimise effective working relationships and ensure that neither social workers nor clients have inappropriate or unrealistic expectations of themselves and of the outcomes of the assistance rendered.
- c. Social workers shall raise awareness to the appropriate bodies when they encounter colleagues engaging in unethical practices or behaviours that may put clients at risk.

4. Professional Boundaries and Dual Relationships

- a. Social workers shall take steps to ensure clear and appropriate professional boundaries (e.g. physical, emotional) where dual or multiple relationships with colleagues occur, and minimise conflict of interests, exploitation or harm.

C. SOCIAL WORKERS' ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PRACTICE SETTINGS

1. Working in the Organisational Setting

- a. Social workers value and respect the social work professional role within the organisation, and its unique contribution within the organisation.

- b. Social workers use social work values, knowledge and skills, in an accountable manner within their designated organisational roles. They are expected to know and understand their organisation's policies, protocols and procedures in achieving the mission of the organisation.
- c. Social workers shall take steps to address situations where organisational role requirements and social work professional roles are in conflict.

2. Professional Services

- a. Social workers shall be remunerated for their professional work, through salaries, fees, grants or other payments permissible under the terms of their employment and by no other gain connected with their practice.
- b. Social workers shall not accept goods or services from clients as payment for professional services. Bartering arrangements, particularly involving services, create the potential for conflict of interests, exploitation and inappropriate boundaries in the social workers' relationship with their clients.

D. SOCIAL WORKERS' ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY AS PROFESSIONALS AND TO THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

1. Commitment to Ethical Practice

- a. Social workers shall have knowledge of this Code, and develop an understanding of how the ethical guidelines are applied to professional practice. Social workers are committed to reflect on their own ethical practice based on feedback from colleagues and relevant stakeholders.
- b. Social workers shall be responsible to raise awareness to the appropriate bodies in instances where there are violations to this Code that may put the clients' interests at risk.
- c. Social workers shall support and defend fellow social workers against accusations that are false or unjust.
- d. Social workers shall co-operate with the relevant bodies in investigations of complaints made against themselves or their fellow social workers.

2. Competence

- a. Social workers shall be committed to uphold the integrity of the profession, and operate from a recognised knowledge base.
- b. Social workers provide services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their education, training, social work accreditation, consultation received, supervised experience or other relevant professional experience.
- c. Social workers shall take the necessary steps required in situations where their health, impairments or other factors may affect their professional judgement or duty. Social workers shall take steps to ensure their clients' continued wellbeing, as well as fulfil their responsibility towards their organisation and colleagues by ensuring and rendering competent services.
- d. Social workers shall undertake appropriate action when they assess that their social work colleague's health, impairments or other factors interfere with their

professional judgement or duty. Social workers shall, if possible, discuss any such concerns directly with the colleague concerned.

3. Education, Training and Supervision

- a. Social workers shall strive to remain proficient in their professional practice and the performance of professional functions by critically examining, and keeping current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work, reviewing professional literature regularly and participating in continuing education that is relevant to social work practice and social work ethics.
- b. Social workers shall be committed to the education and training of social work students and colleagues regarding the knowledge and understanding of both the social work profession and this Code, emphasising the relationship of these matters to practice, teaching and research.
- c. Social workers recognise the role of themselves as supervisors which is intended to be educational, supportive, developmental and work-focused. If supervisees request or require therapy, they shall be referred to another competent practitioner.
- d. Social workers adhere to the principles of privacy and confidentiality in the supervisory relationship, acknowledging any limits to confidentiality that may apply.

4. Professional Bearing

- a. Social workers shall refrain from any personal behaviour that brings disrepute to the profession, and/or acts against the values stated in this Code.
- b. Social workers, to the best extent possible, shall declare in public statement or action, whether they are speaking or acting as individuals, or as authorised representatives of a professional association, or any other organisation.
- c. Social workers shall not condone, facilitate or collaborate with any form of discrimination, including but not limited to race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, and mental and physical abilities.
- d. Social workers shall acknowledge the work of, and the contributions made by others.
- e. Social workers shall take responsibility to promote the social work profession. This may include undertaking activities such as teaching, mentoring, research, consultation services, advocacy and representation to public bodies, presentations to the community, and participation in the activities of SASW.
- f. Social workers are committed to promoting the profession of social work and defending the profession against unfair or unjust criticisms.
- g. Social workers are committed to correcting, through professional channels, abuses to good standards perpetuated by those using the title “Social Worker” wrongly, inappropriately or falsely.
- h. Social workers shall refrain from any form of self-advertisement which makes unsubstantiated claims pertaining to their work, the services provided and the results that can be expected.

5. Evaluation and Research

- a. Social workers who are engaged in evaluation and research shall adhere to relevant organisational guidelines or ethical review processes to protect participants.
- b. Social workers shall obtain the appropriate voluntary and written informed consent from participants. Participants shall be informed of the nature, purpose, duration, extent, risks and benefits of the research process. Participants shall be given the option not to participate in the evaluation or research, or withdraw from it at any time.
- c. Social workers shall provide the appropriate measures to ensure the rights of participants are protected where informed consent is not possible, and shall obtain written consent from an appropriate proxy or guardian.
- d. Social workers shall observe confidentiality, voluntariness, informed consent, and respect to participants when engaging them in evaluation or research work.
- e. Social workers shall ensure that appropriate steps are taken during evaluation and research and shall minimise any possible harm to participants. Steps shall also be taken to ensure participants have access to supportive services to address any discomfort that may arise from the evaluation and research participation process.
- f. Social workers shall report on the evaluation and research findings factually and accurately.

E. SOCIAL WORKERS' ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY TO SOCIETY

1. Advocacy

- a. Social workers are obliged not only to the welfare of those served by them, but also the groups and communities they represent with due regard to the common welfare. This obligation may entail actions taken to influence and shape social conditions, policies, or services.
- b. Social workers have the responsibility to give feedback on policies and social conditions that are deemed detrimental to individuals, families and communities.

2. Responding to National Crises

- a. Social workers are committed to the welfare of society, and shall provide professional services during national crises when required.

REFERENCES

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The SASW Code of Professional Ethics (1st Revision) was edited by Dr Myrna Blake and Ms Prema Thirupathy in 1999. It was subsequently presented and accepted in-principle by the SASW Annual General Meeting on 25 June 1999.

The SASW Code of Professional Ethics (2nd Revision) was edited by Dr Myrna Blake, Mrs Ngiam Geak Kim and Mr Benny Bong in 2004. The edited version of the SASW Code of Professional Ethics was circulated at the 34th AGM in 2004 for approval. There were no objections made to the revised version.

The SASW Code of Professional Ethics (3rd Revision) was edited by Dr Goh Soon Noi, Ms Agnes Chia, Mrs Grace Vaz, Ms Chee Liee Chin, Mr Reynard Lye and Mr Mohamed Fareez in 2017. The edited 3rd Revision of the SASW Code of Professional Ethics was circulated to members four weeks before the 47th AGM. Inputs and feedback received from members were considered and incorporated to the edited 3rd Revision of the SASW Code of Professional Ethics and the revised version was circulated to members five days before the 47th AGM. This latest edited 3rd Revision was tabled at the 47th AGM in 2017 for approval. There were further amendments made during discussions with members at the 47th AGM. Members accepted all the changes recommended in the Code and the 3rd Revision was then passed and adopted by members as the full finalised SASW Code of Professional Ethics (3rd Revision) at the 47th AGM on the 28 July 2017.