

Technology Standards of Practice

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Standards of Practice

Social work practice and related governmental regulatory standards vary significantly within North America and internationally. Further, ethical standards and norms vary among diverse cultural groups served by social workers. Standards adopted by governmental regulatory bodies related to electronic social work services should take into consideration international and other cultural differences. Social workers who use digital or other electronic technology to provide information to the public, deliver services to clients, communicate with and about clients, manage confidential information and case records, and store and access information about clients shall adhere to standards pertaining to informed consent; privacy and confidentiality; boundaries, dual relationships, and conflicts of interest; practitioner competence; records and documentation; and collegial relationships.

Definitions

Client means the individual, couple, family, group, organization, or community that seeks or receives social work services from an individual social worker or organization. Client status is not dependent on billing or payment of fees for such services.

Electronic social work services mean the use of computers (including the Internet, social media, online chat, text, and email) and other electronic means (such as smartphones, 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.

Governmental regulatory body/bodies means the governing body/bodies regulating social work practice in a state, territory, or province

In-person refers to interactions in which the social worker and the client are in the same physical space and does not include interactions that may occur through the use of technology.

Jurisdiction or **jurisdictional** refers to the area governed by a state, territorial, or provincial government.

Regulated means licensure, registration, certification or professional oversight by a governmental regulatory body.

Remote refers to the provision of a service that is received at a different site from where the social worker is physically located. Remote includes no consideration related to distance and may refer to a site that is near to or far from the social worker.

Section 1:

Practitioner Competence and Compliance with Ethical Standards

Social workers who choose to provide electronic social work services shall:

1.01. Do so only after engaging in appropriate education, study, training, consultation, and supervision from people who are competent in the use of this technology to provide social work services.

1.02. Use professional judgment, critically examine, and keep current with emerging knowledge related to the delivery of electronic social work services. Social workers shall review relevant professional literature and participate in continuing education related to electronic social work practice. When examining research evidence, social workers shall give precedence to research that meets prevailing professional methodological and ethical standards.

1.03. When delivering services, be aware of cultural differences among clients and in clients' use of digital and other electronic technology. Social workers shall assess cultural, environmental, and linguistic issues that may affect the delivery of services.

1.04. Be aware of unique communication challenges associated with electronic social work services (e.g., the absence of visual cues and limitations associated with the use of online written communication). Social workers shall establish reasonable strategies to address these issues (e.g., using interpretive gestures and emotions, enhancing clients' ability to communicate online or with other technology).

1.05. Assess whether clients' needs can be met using electronic social work services and, when necessary, refer clients to another professional.

1.06. Refer clients to another professional if clients prefer not to receive electronic social work services.

1.07. Seek consultation, when necessary, from colleagues with relevant expertise.

1.08. Have specialized skills, knowledge, and education consistent with current standards of practice when providing supervision and consultation to colleagues who provide electronic social work services.

1.09. Comply with the regulations governing the use of this technology both in the jurisdiction in which they are regulated and in the jurisdiction in which the client is located.

1.10. Review professionally relevant information about themselves that appears on websites and in other publicly available resources to ensure accuracy. Social workers shall take reasonable steps to correct any inaccuracies.

Section 2:

Informed Consent

Social workers who choose to provide electronic social work services shall:

2.01. Obtain the informed consent of the individuals using their services during the initial screening or interview and prior to initiating services. Social workers shall assess clients' capacity to provide informed consent.

2.02. Develop policies and inform clients about the nature of available services, potential benefits and risks, alternative ways of receiving assistance, fees, involvement of and sharing information with third parties, and limits of confidentiality. Examples of potential benefits are immediate access to services, convenient scheduling, privacy, and reduced or eliminated transportation barriers. Examples of potential risks are the lack of visual and auditory cues, delayed responses, the need for crisis services, confidentiality breaches, and technological failures.

2.03 Provide information in a manner that is understandable and culturally appropriate for the client. Clients shall be given sufficient opportunity to ask questions and receive answers about electronic social work services. Social workers shall revisit relevant informed consent issues as needed during the course of the professional-client relationship. Social workers' efforts to provide this information to clients shall be documented in the client record.

2.04. Take reasonable steps to verify the identity and location of clients (e.g., requesting scanned copies of government-issued identification). When verification of a client's identity is not required or feasible (e.g., when social workers provide crisis services remotely), social workers shall inform clients of the limitations of the services that can be provided.

2.05. Develop and disclose to clients policies on the use of Internet-based search engines to gather information about clients.

2.06. Inform the client, and document in the client record, the use of Internet-based search engines to gather information about the client.

2.07. Conduct an initial screening at the point of the client's first contact and assess the client's suitability and capacity for online and remote services. Social workers shall consider the client's intellectual, emotional, and physical ability to use digital and other electronic technology to receive services and the client's ability to understand the potential risks and limitations of such services.

2.08 Use professional judgment to determine whether an initial in-person, videoconference, or telephone consultation is warranted before undertaking electronic

social work services. Social workers shall continually assess their clients' suitability for electronic social work services during the course of the professional relationship. Social workers' assessment shall consider a client's:

- age. Social workers shall consider the legal age of consent in the client's place of residence.
- clinical and diagnostic issues. Social workers shall assess clinical and diagnostic concerns that may preclude a client from being appropriate for electronic social work services.
- technological skills. Social workers shall assess a client's experience with and ability to use the digital and other electronic technology that the social worker uses to deliver electronic social work services.
- disabilities. Social workers shall ensure that a client with disabilities is able to benefit from electronic social work services.
- language skills and literacy. Social workers shall assess a client's ability to communicate, including language abilities, language barriers, and reading and comprehension ability.
- cultural issues. Social workers shall assess whether the use of electronic social work services is inclusive and consistent with a client's cultural values and norms.
- safety issues. Social workers shall assess the extent to which a client has access to family, friends, and social supports; community resources; and emergency services.

2.09. When developing a professional website for the general public, clients, and professionals, provide clear and accessible information about services. This information shall include:

- professional profile and contact information. Social workers shall display their contact information, including email address, business postal address, and telephone number. Social workers shall provide accurate information about their educational degrees. Their professional licenses and/or certifications shall be conspicuously displayed.
- terms of use, privacy policy, and informed consent. Social workers shall provide clients with either a webpage or a downloadable document that includes the terms of use, privacy policy, and informed consent information, how credit card information and client records are stored, retained, shared, and used.
- crisis intervention. Social workers shall provide clear and explicit guidelines to assist clients who require crisis services at times when the social worker is unavailable.
- risks of interruption in services. Social workers shall develop a protocol to manage interruption of services due to technological failure. Social workers shall inform clients about how to proceed if there are technological difficulties during a

session or other efforts to communicate (e.g., by video, live online chat, email, or text).

- consumer information. Social workers shall inform each client of their license or registration number, governmental regulatory body's name, address, telephone number, email address, and website for reporting alleged violations of law or rule that govern the practice of social work within the jurisdiction in which the social worker is located. Social workers shall inform clients of their right to report alleged violations to the governmental regulatory body that governs social work practice in the jurisdiction where the client is located.

Section 3:

Privacy and Confidentiality

Social workers who choose to provide electronic social work services shall:

3.01. Inform clients about risks associated with disclosure of confidential information on the Internet, social media sites, text-messaging sites, and videoconferencing sites, and the potential consequences.

3.02. Use proper safeguards, including encryption, when sharing confidential information using digital or other electronic technology. Social workers shall protect clients' stored confidential information through the use of proper safeguards, including secure firewalls, encryption software, and password protection.

3.03. Adhere to statutes and regulations regarding the secure use of digital and other electronic technology both within their jurisdictions and within the jurisdiction where the client is located.

3.04. Obtain client consent when using electronic search engines to gather information about the client, with the exception of emergency circumstances when such search may provide information to help protect the client or other parties who may be at risk.

3.05. Develop confidentiality agreements for clients, including a summary of confidentiality exceptions. Social workers shall document a client's consent and acknowledgment of the confidentiality agreement in the client record.

3.06. Inform clients that clients are not permitted to disclose or post digital or other electronic communications from social workers or other recipients of services without proper consent.

3.07. Inform family, couple, and group clients that the social worker cannot guarantee that all participants will honor such agreements.

3.08. Protect the confidentiality of all information obtained by, or stored using, digital and other electronic technology except when disclosure is necessary to prevent serious, foreseeable, and imminent harm to a client or other identifiable person, or to comply with statutes, regulations, and court orders.

3.09. Inform clients that third-party services that feature text messaging or other direct electronic messaging may provide limited security and protection of confidential information. Social workers shall inform clients as soon as possible about secure ways to contact them.

3.10. Take steps to ensure that confidential digital communications are protected. Social workers shall use proper safeguards, including encryption, when using digital

communications such as email communications, online posts, online chat sessions, mobile communication, and text communications. Social workers shall develop and disclose policies and procedures for notifying clients as soon as possible of any breach of confidential information.

Section 4:

Boundaries, Dual Relationships, and Conflicts of Interest

Social workers who choose to provide electronic social work services shall:

- 4.01. Avoid developing inappropriate dual or multiple relationships with clients.
- 4.02. Avoid perceived or actual conflicts of interest.
- 4.03. Communicate with clients using digital and other electronic technology (such as social networking sites, online chat, email, text messages, and video) only for professional or treatment-related purposes and only with client consent.
- 4.04. Discuss with clients the social workers' policies concerning digital and other electronic communication between scheduled appointments, during emergencies and social workers' vacations, and after normal working hours.
- 4.05. Take reasonable steps to prevent client access to social workers' personal social networking sites to avoid boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships. Social workers shall maintain separate professional and personal social media and websites in order to establish clear boundaries and to avoid inappropriate dual relationships.
- 4.06. Avoid posting personal information on professional websites, blogs, or other forms of social media that might create boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships.
- 4.07. Avoid posting any identifying or confidential information about clients on professional websites, blogs, or other forms of social media.
- 4.08. Be aware that cultural factors may influence the likelihood of discovering shared friend networks on websites, blogs, and other forms of social media. Social workers shall be aware that shared membership in cultural groups based on race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, religion, addiction recovery, and other personal interests may create boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships. Social workers shall avoid conflicts of interest and inappropriate dual relationships based on their personal interests and online presence.
- 4.09. Refrain from soliciting digital or online testimonials from clients or former clients who, because of their particular circumstances, are vulnerable to undue influence.
- 4.10. Refrain from accepting "friend" or contact or blog response requests from clients on social networking sites. Exceptions may be made when such contact is an explicit

component of a treatment or service-delivery model and meets prevailing standards regarding the use of digital technology to serve clients.

4.11. When avoidable, refrain from providing electronic social work services to a person with whom a social worker has had a personal relationship.

4.12. When providing supervision or consultation remotely to individuals, be knowledgeable about the unique issues telecommunication technologies pose for supervision or consultation.

4.13 When providing supervision remotely, adhere to the regulatory requirements of the jurisdiction where the supervised practitioner is regulated.

Section 5:

Records and Documentation

Social workers who choose to provide electronic social work services shall:

5.01. Develop policies regarding sharing, retention, and storage of digital and other electronic communications and records and inform clients of these policies.

5.02. Document all contacts with and services provided to clients and inform clients that digital and electronic communications will be included in client records.

5.03. Inform clients about the mechanisms used to secure and back up records (such as hard drive, external drive, third-party server), and the length of time records will be stored before being destroyed.

5.04. Inform clients that they have a right to information about the content of their records in accord with prevailing ethical and legal standards.

Section 6:

Collegial Relationships

Social workers who choose to provide electronic social work services shall:

6.01. Abide by professional values and ethical standards when communicating with and about colleagues, avoiding cyberbullying, harassment, or making derogatory or defamatory comments.

6.02. Not disclose private, confidential, or sensitive information about the work or personal life of any colleague without consent, including messages, photographs, videos, or any other material that could invade or compromise a colleague's privacy.

6.03. Take reasonable steps to correct or remove any inaccurate or offensive information they have posted or transmitted about a colleague using digital or other electronic technology.

6.04. Not use digital or other electronic technology to present the work of others as their own. Social workers shall acknowledge the work of and the contributions made by others.

6.05. Take appropriate action if they believe that a colleague who provides electronic social work services is behaving unethically, is not using safeguards such as firewalls or encryption, or is allowing unauthorized access to digitally or electronically stored information. Such action may include discussing their concerns with the colleague when feasible and when such discussion is likely to produce a resolution. If there is no resolution, social workers shall report through appropriate formal channels established by employers, agencies, professional organizations, and governmental regulatory bodies.

6.06. Use professional judgment and take steps to discourage, prevent, expose, and correct any efforts by colleagues to knowingly produce, possess, download, or transmit illicit or illegal content or images in digital or electronic format.

Section 7:

Electronic Practice Across Jurisdictional Boundaries

Social workers who choose to provide electronic social work services shall:

7.01 Comply with the laws and regulations that govern electronic social work services within the jurisdictions in which the social worker is located and in which the client is located.

To access the full document “Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice” from the ASWB International Technology Task Force, 2013-2014, click the link below:

<https://www.aswb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ASWB-Model-Regulatory-Standards-for-Technology-and-Social-Work-Practice.pdf>