

Canadian Association of Social Workers

Frequently Asked Questions



What Changes Were Made To The Code?

The 2005 Code consists of two documents, the Code of Ethics and the 'Guidelines for Ethical Practice'.

The 2024 Code integrates values, guiding principles, and guidelines into one document or ease of use and application.

The Code was developed through the lens of the Truth and Reconciliation principles. A new value was developed that highlights the profession's commitment to pursuing Truth and Reconciliation by understanding and upholding the rights of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Peoples and by acknowledging Indigenous world views in their practice with Indigenous people. The Code addresses obligations to ensure services are offered in a manner that respects the service users' ethnicity, national origin, age, economic status, gender, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, culture, varying abilities, language, religion, values, and beliefs. Expectations that social workers take a trauma-informed approach to their practice, recognize resilience, and understand intersecting factors of exclusion are spoken to in the Code. The Code also addresses responsibilities when providing e-therapies and the use of social media and supports public accountability through membership in a provincial or territorial regulatory body.

What Resources Are Available To Support The Revised Code?

CASW has developed this Frequently Asked Questions document as well as a document that compares the 2005 Code of Ethics and the Guidelines for Ethical Practice with the 2024 Code of Ethics. In March 2024 CASW will launch a webcast series that looks deeper at the Code with discussions about how it applies to practice.

Who Was Consulted While Developing The Code?

Over 2,200 social workers were consulted at various times during the three years period of the Code development through online surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews. Written opinions were also received from several members. One hundred eighty-four social workers participated in 28 focus group sessions targeting to provincial association members and to members who identified as Francophone, First Nation, Metis, Inuit, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQI, Black, racially marginalized or having intersecting identities.

Did CASW Seek Input From Clients?

Yes, service users were consulted through an on-line survey that was distributed by members of CASW resulting in 238 responses.

Is The CASW Code Similar To Social Work Codes In Other Countries?

Codes of Ethics from national social work professional organizations who had updated their Codes since 2019 were reviewed and aided in informing the CASW Code. The CASW Code is like that of other jurisdictions in that it is grounded in values and sets a framework based on guiding principles.

When Will The Code Be Reviewed And Updated?

CASW recognizes that a Code of Ethics is both a document grounded in timeless professional values and reflects the evolution of the profession's knowledge and current practice approaches. Therefore, CASW is committed to reviewing the new Code in 5 years (i.e., 2029) and will begin the process before then to ensure adequate time for consultation. CASW welcomes feedback at any time and can be addressed to casw@casw-acts.ca.

What Is The Purpose Of The Code?

The Code serves as a foundation for the ethical practice of social work in Canada. All values, principles and guidelines have equal importance and work together to describe the ethical conduct, behaviour, and professionalism necessary to provide ethical social work services in Canada.

What Is The Difference Between Guiding Principles And Guidelines?

Guiding Principles align with a value and define the parameters for expected ethical behaviour that demonstrate that value in practice. Guidelines describe specific behaviours by a social worker that demonstrate how the guiding principle is applied to practice. Together the Guiding Principles and the Guidelines form the framework for ethical practice and decision-making.

What Is The Difference Between Code Of Ethics And Standards Of Practice Document?

The Code articulates the values, guiding principles, and guidelines of social work practice for the profession. The Code is not a set of rules that prescribes how social workers should act in all situations.

Standards are statements that describe the behaviours required to achieve the level of quality in practice and tend to use compelling language such as 'shall', and 'must'. Regulatory bodies in the provinces and territories are governed by legislation to protect the public interest. Regulatory bodies set the standards of practice for social workers in the province and territory.

How Can The Code Of Ethics Guide Ethical Practice?

The Code provides a framework for ethical practice and, in conjunction with a commitment to providing ethical social work services, guides the social worker's behaviour and decision-making that respects the rights of all involved and does the greatest good and least harm.

This Code also encourages social workers to seek supervision and to consult with their provincial or territorial regulatory body when dealing with an ethical concern or dilemma.

Why Does The Code Use The Term 'Service User' And Not 'Client'?

The term 'service user' is an inclusive term used to refer to individuals (clients, patients, residents, etc.), parents and substitute decision-makers, families, groups, communities, and populations who access or receive social work services. It is a term that recognizes their right to be involved in decision-making.

Why Is The Term "All People" Used Sometimes And "Service User" Used Other Times?

The term 'all people' and "people" include all individuals, families, groups, and communities, irrespective of their participation in social work services. Social workers are expected to uphold values and behave ethically to all people. Many, but not all, of the Guiding Principles relate to a social worker's work with people regardless of formal involvement in services.

The Code Speaks To Social Workers Duty To Obtain Informed Consent From Clients, But Many Social Workers Work In Settings Such As Hospitals, The Justice System And Child Protection Where Clients Are Often Ordered By The Court To Participate In Services. How Does Consent Work In Those Situations? What Does Obtaining Informed Consent In All Circumstances Look Like? - How Is The Notion Of Informed Consent Applied?

The Code provides clarity when seeking informed consent even in situations where services are mandated, or court ordered to participate in social work services. Social workers have a responsibility to inform involuntary service users of the limitations with respect to what aspects of consent may still apply to ensure that service users can attain some level self-determination in different aspects of clinical decision making.

Why Is The Code Not Specific In Stating Ethical Obligations To The Various Diverse And Equity Deserving Groups?

The Code expects social workers to have an overall understanding of and to uphold basic human rights principles for all people. This includes equity deserving groups and people from diverse backgrounds. Listing all the possible diverse and equity seeking groups proved as overly prescriptive and offered no guarantees of complete inclusivity.

How Do Social Workers Learn And Understand The World View Of First Nation, Métis, And Inuit People? If A Social Worker Does Not Work With Indigenous People Are They Still Required To Learn This?

Social workers can learn about the world views of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis people by developing their own awareness and knowledge through a professional development plan in consultation with their supervisors. This can include participating in activities (e.g., workshops, reading journal articles and participating in webinars provided by CASW, provincial partners and provincial territorial regulatory bodies.

Under Value 2, The Code Includes A Guiding Principle About Social Workers Duty To Advocate For Protection Of The Environment (GP 2.4). How Can Social Workers Be Responsible For The Environment?

The social work profession is grounded in principles of social justice. By promoting the protection of the environment and highlighting the impacts of climate change on people impacted by draught, wildfires and weather related disasters, social workers can play an important role in advocating for legislative and policy changes that impact the well-being of all people and address the inequities experienced by people vulnerable to climate change.

Value 3 Focuses On Truth And Reconciliation With First Nation, Inuit, And Métis Peoples. Why Is There Not Also A Value That Focuses On Other Equity Deserving Groups?

This new value with accompanying guiding principles acknowledges that First Nation, Inuit, and Métis Peoples have treaty, constitutional, human, and self-governing rights in Canada. This value reflects on how social workers can acknowledge the significance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Calls to Action; and provides guidance on respectful engagement, relationship building and authentic and meaningful changes to social work practice.

In Value 4, The Code Has A Guiding Principle That Addresses Social Workers Obligation To Practice Self-reflection (GP 4.2).

Value 4 focuses on appreciating human relationships, social work practice-based empathy, compassion and non-judgemental approach and having the well-being of people at the center of professional relationships. The Guiding Principles recognize that providing social work services can be emotionally demanding and ultimately, can have a detrimental impact on the social worker's ability to practice. Developing self-awareness and practicing self-reflection and self-care strengthens a social worker's ability to provide empathic and compassionate services without judgement.

In Value 5, The Code Addresses Conflict Of Interest And The Potential For Conflict Of Interest With Service Users And Colleagues. But The Code Does Not Specifically Address Dual Or Multiple Relationships. Why Does The Code Not Have Specific Ethical Responsibilities To Address Dual/ Multiple Relationships?

Social workers are expected to take the steps necessary to maintain professional boundaries and avoid conflict of interest situations in all relationships. While it can be more challenging to avoid conflicts in dual/ multiple relationships, the expectation to take steps to avoid conflict remains the same across all relationships. Social workers are advised to seek consultation with their regulatory body and/or supervision for more detailed guidance on this topic and to help sort out the specific challenges in their unique situation.

The Guiding Principle 5.3 In Value 5 Addresses Conflict Of Interest, But What Would That Really Look Like In Practice?

Conflicts of Interest are situations where a person's personal interests' conflict with their professional obligations and duties. A conflict of interest can lead to biased decision-making, judgement, unethical behaviour, and exploitation of service users. For example, having financial connections with a service user or another service provider, such as accepting gifts, favors, bartering or engaging in business transactions that could influence the social worker's decision-making. Receiving gifts is complicated because of the cultural, societal, and relationship factors and could possibly cause the social worker to be obligated to act in a way that benefits the service user unequally to other people. Social workers are advised to consult with their regulatory body to obtain more detailed resources about this complex issue.

Why Is There A Guiding Principle Dedicated To Only Social Workers In Private Practice? (Value 5 GP 5.4) Are Not All Social Workers Obligated To Follow All The Guiding Principles?

Social workers in private practice are guided by all the values, guiding principles and guidelines outlined in the Code and GP 5.4 focuses on a variety of business practices such as soliciting clients, advertising, use of social media and fees. Social workers in private practice are encouraged to consult with their regulatory body for more specific standards.

The Code Speaks A Lot About Confidentiality (Value 6); Why Is This Aspect Emphasized?

Social workers have an ethical and legal duty to protect confidentiality and safeguard the trust placed in the professional relationship. The Code sets out those obligations including those related to information shared and documented in official records, the limits of confidentiality in professional practice, ethical disclosure practices, and the provision of electronic social work services.

There Are Guidelines That Speak To Various Obligations When Providing Electronic Social Work Services; (GP 6.2, GP 6.3, And GP 6.5) Why Is This Form Of Service Delivery Emphasized?

The Covid-19 global pandemic that led to broad adoption of electronic (virtual) social work services brought to light competency, privacy and confidentiality elements that have given rise to ethical issues in practice. Given that the use of electronic social work services may be intermittent or ongoing, the Code, which outlines ethical considerations and implications of using technology, telecommunication, and technology applications, can guide social workers in the provision of electronic social work services.

Many Social Workers Do Not Conduct Research, Therefore How Is Guiding Principle 7.4 Relevant To Social Workers?

Social workers contribute to the knowledge base and advancement of the social work profession in varied ways including through research and non-research activities. The scope of social work research is along the 'consumer-producer' continuum whereby social workers engage in one or more roles along the continuum of research participation. At one end, participation can be indirect (as in a user or consumer of research) or at the other end, participation can be direct (as a producer of research). The Code stipulates that research involving human subjects is guided by the ethical principles outlined in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement. Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans TCPS 2 (2022)*. The Code also outlines ethical considerations when engaging in non-research activities.