NASW
National Association of Social Workers

ASWB

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and

Association of Social Work Boards

Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice

National Association of Social Workers

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About the Associations

The **National Association of Social Workers (NASW**) is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the world. Membership in NASW includes over 150,000 social workers from 50 states, the District of Columbia, New York City, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, Puerto Rico, and U.S. social workers practicing abroad. The mission of NASW is to enhance the professional growth and development of its members, to create and maintain professional standards, and to advance sound social policies.

The **Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB**) is the association of jurisdictional boards that regulate social work. Membership in ASWB includes 49 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Saskatchewan. The mission of ASWB is to assist social work regulatory bodies in carrying out their legislated mandates and to encourage jurisdictional efforts to protect a diverse public served by social workers who are regulated through common values, ethics, and practice standards.

Preface

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) have developed *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* to create a uniform document for the profession. 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.

The standards apply to the use of technology as an adjunct to practice, as well as practice that is exclusively conducted with technology. The NASW *Code of Ethics* and the ASWB *Model Social Work Practice Act* served as foundation documents in developing these standards, along with a variety of other sources. The standards use a humanistic values framework to ensure that ethical social work practice can be enhanced by the appropriate use of technology.

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 guide 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, government regulatory bodies, insurance carriers, and others about the professional standards for the use of technology in the provision of social work services.

*Special Note: The order in which the standards appear does **NOT** reflect their order of importance.*

Contents

Introduction

Technology and social work practice, when used in these standards, is defined as *any electronically mediated activity used in the conduct of competent and ethical delivery of social work services.*

The past two decades have witnessed an immense expansion of the use of information 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-mediated direct practice possible on a global scale; social workers and clients can uncover vast Web-based sources for information that can enhance the likelihood of effective interventions; support groups for people at risk can be easily created and moderated. At the agency level, case management programs can generate reports, track personnel, automate billing, forecast budgets, and greatly assist service planning and delivery; global-level consultation and conference abilities are at hand; emerging geographic information systems can pinpoint community assets and needs. The future promises even more changes: automated interventions that do not require the direct involvement of the worker are emerging, and wireless technologies are facilitating social work in the field. These current and near-future technologies are changing the nature of professional social work practice in countless ways.

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

Several critical issues need to be addressed: many technologies are powerful but fragile; crucial information can be lost or intercepted; not all Web sites providing information are reliable; service providers can easily misrepresent themselves and their credentials online; confidentiality in an electronic medium can quickly evaporate; jurisdiction, liability and malpractice issues blur when state lines and national boundaries are crossed electronically; numerous digital divides can thwart access and success; and clients and social workers alike may have unrealistic expectations for what a technology can actually provide.

Standard 1. Ethics and Values

Social workers providing services via the telephone or other electronic means shall act ethically, ensure professional competence, protect clients, and uphold the values of the profession.

Interpretation

Social workers should ensure that services conform to all practice and regulatory standards addressing ethical conduct and protection of the public. The NASW *Code of Ethics*, licensing laws, and regulations from licensing boards set forth principles and standards to guide the conduct of social workers, establish basic competencies, and allow for the evaluation of both. The NASW *Code of Ethics* also sets forth explicit standards for social work conduct in all practice arenas. Social workers providing services through electronic means should know about the codes, standards, practices, and values and incorporate them into their practices.

The potential for harm or abuse of vulnerable people can be increased because of the lack of a face-to-face relationship with the social worker. Therefore, the social worker should 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.

Standard 2. Access

Social workers shall have access to technology and appropriate support systems to ensure competent practice, and shall take action to ensure client access to technology.

Interpretation

Many "digital divides" can limit access for social workers and clients. Unavailable or obsolete equipment or software can make access difficult, while use of policies, privacy and security features, language issues, and the reading comprehension levels required may thwart access entirely. Even when such issues are adequately addressed, people with disabilities often have additional support needs. Social workers should advocate for both themselves and for clients to resolve access problems.

Social workers should ensure that adequate risk-reducing precautions are in place that will protect clients. All communications directed toward clients need to be written at a level and in a manner that is culturally competent and easily understood. Access for people with disabilities should conform to standards.

Standard 3. Cultural Competence and Vulnerable Populations

Social workers shall select and develop appropriate online methods, skills, and techniques that are attuned to their clients' cultural, bicultural, or marginalized experiences in their environments. In striving for cultural competence, social workers shall have the skills to work with a wide range of people who are culturally different or who may be considered a member of a vulnerable population, such as people with disabilities and racial, ethnic, and sexual minority status, and those whose primary language may not be English.

Interpretation

The social work profession has espoused a commitment to diversity, inclusion, and affirmative action. Social workers possess specialized knowledge regarding the influence of social and cultural discrimination for people of racial, ethnic, religious, sexual minority status, and people with physical and mental disabilities. Electronic communication can provide access to information, referral, advocacy services, and interpersonal communication; however, social workers should be aware of the cultural contexts of global social work services. This requires the continuous development of specialized knowledge and understanding of the history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions of major client groups served through technology. Geographical barriers are inherently absent on the Internet. Client perspectives of therapy and service delivery via technology may differ. Because of the social isolation often experienced by people in vulnerable populations, social workers should be aware of the potential for exploitation and misuse of electronic methods with these individuals and families. In addition, culturally competent social workers should know the strengths and limitations of current electronic modalities, process and practice models, to provide services that are applicable and relevant to the needs of culturally and geographically diverse clients and members of vulnerable populations.

Standard 4. Technical Competencies

Social workers shall be responsible for becoming proficient in the technological skills and tools required for competent and ethical practice and for seeking appropriate training and consultation to stay current with emerging technologies.

Interpretation

Numerous technologies are available to social workers to establish, enhance, and deliver services; conduct research; and circulate information. They represent a new method of agency administration and service delivery. Computer-based software helps social workers track client services and outcomes. Technical systems are increasingly available to support ongoing routines and standard operating procedures vital for agency functioning and efficiency. These technologies include tools such as budget planning, assessment, client record keeping, reimbursement, delivery of information to the community, research, and service delivery.

Standard 5. Regulatory Competencies

Social workers who use telephonic or other electronic means to provide services shall abide by all regulation 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.

Interpretation

The practice of professional social work is regulated in some manner in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Canada, and other countries. Social workers should be aware of the laws, rules or other regulations that govern their work. They should comply with applicable regulation in all jurisdictions in which they practice. Social workers should understand that in some jurisdictions, the delivery of social work services is deemed to take place at the location of the client. It is the social worker's responsibility to contact the regulatory board(s) of intent to provide services and find out what requirements are necessary to provide services legally in those jurisdictions.

Standard 6. Identification and Verification

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

Interpretation

Social workers should advertise and perform only those services they are licensed, certified, and 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 certification bodies and licensing boards to facilitate verification. Social workers need to provide their full name, credentials, licensure information, office address and phone number, and e-mail address. In additional, each party should plan for technology failures by providing alternate ways of making contact.

Standard 7. 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 record.

Interpretation

During the initial session, social workers should provide clients with information on the use of technology in service delivery. Social workers should obtain client confirmation of notice of privacy practices and any authorizations for information disclosure and consents for treatment or services. Social workers should be aware of privacy risks involved when using wireless devices and other future technological innovations and take proper steps to protect client privacy.

Social workers should adhere to the privacy and security standards of applicable laws such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and other jurisdictional laws when performing services electronically. These laws address electronic transactions, patient rights, and allowable disclosure and include requirements regarding data protection, firewalls, password protection, and audit trails.

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

Standard 8. Risk Management

Social workers providing services through the use of the telephone or other electronic means shall ensure high-quality practices and procedures that are legally sound and ethical to protect clients and safeguard against litigation.

Interpretation

Social workers shall provide a standard of care that is consistent with the NASW *Code of Ethics*, licensing laws, applicable organization policies and procedures, relevant criminal laws, and regulations for businesses and the practice of fair trade. 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. Key issues such as communication guidelines (timing and length of e-mails), security mechanisms (encryption, firewalls and pass codes), and actions to ensure fair and equitable fees should be addressed.

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

Standard 9. Practice Competencies

9-1. Advocacy and Social Action

Social workers shall use technology to inform and mobilize communities about policies that will benefit individuals and groups and seek to provide tools, opportunities, and information so that clients are able to advocate directly for their own interests.

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. Voter registration is now offered on many Web sites, including NASW's, to promote civic participation. On an individual case advocacy level, 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.

9-2. Community Practice

Social workers shall advocate for the adoption and use of relevant technologies that will enhance the well-being of communities.

Interpretation

Social workers are in a unique position to ensure that technological innovations are culturally sensitive and attuned to the characteristics and needs of the specific community. Technologies such as e-mail groups, resource-rich Web sites, databases, and geographic information systems can assist practice within real and virtual communities. It is the social worker's responsibility to be aware of technology that may facilitate community well-being and to advocate for adoption of innovative systems when appropriate. If resources are not available, the social worker should advocate for securing them. When technical support is not forthcoming, the social worker should work to see that this support is made available and that there are systems in place that will foster consistency and permanency. Social workers should strive to ensure access to technology and the benefits of technology for all members of the community.

9-3. Administrative Practice

Social workers shall keep themselves informed about technology that will advance quality program operations and service delivery, invest in and maintain such systems, and establish policies to ensure access, appropriate security, and privacy in agency information systems.

Interpretation

Technology is the backbone of agency administration. Electronic systems are essential for routine operations as well as applications designed to enhance forecasting, long-range planning, and project management. Major tasks, vital routines, ongoing communications, and agency outreach can be facilitated and enhanced through the use of databases, the Internet, and other technologies. When used appropriately, technology can help an agency accomplish its mission in a cost-effective way.

Access to adequate technology can be problematic for underfunded organizations, yet it is important that appropriate use of technology be an integral part of short- and long-term organizational goals. Although the costs of hardware, software, personnel, and training can be daunting, technical systems planning and maintenance should be a routine part of the regular budgeting process.

The agency administrator should be attentive to related issues of information security and confidentiality. The provision of ethical and safe practice should be the driving force behind security and confidentiality policies that carefully address elements ranging from information exchange with third parties, to collaboration, fiscal transactions, and even the physical layout of workstations and other office equipment.

A risk-management plan is highly recommended, and should include protocols and policies for all technologies used by the agency for all administrative, managerial, and social worker–related purposes.

9-4. Clinical Competencies

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

Interpretation

The Internet has become a means for providing individual, group, and family therapy. Social workers should be aware, however, that the possibility of a client suffering harm or loss remains present in any therapeutic encounter. Social workers should fully evaluate potential clients for appropriateness for online social work interventions, and if it is determined that such methods would be appropriate, the social worker should provide the best online assessments and interventions possible.

The process of assessment for online therapy may be similar to assessment for in-person therapy. It is critical to obtain client background, history of presenting problem and previous records if necessary (with confirmation of the client's consent). 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 or technology failures.

Assessment is the key to appropriate intervention in all social work areas. Information technology allows assessments to be more complex and informed. Social workers should use only assessment instruments that are valid, reliable, and free from cultural bias.

Social workers should be aware of the special protection given to psychotherapy notes by HIPAA.

9-5. 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.

Interpretation

The NASW *Code of Ethics* is a statement of values and 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. Human subjects review procedures should be followed rigorously to protect participants from harm and to monitor informed consent protocols.

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, 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.

9-6. Supervision

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

Interpretation

Social workers should follow applicable laws regarding direct services, case, or clinical supervision requirements and the use of technology for the purposes of licensure. Supervision for purposes of licensure is governed by regulatory boards that may have specific definitions and requirements pertaining to the use of technology in supervision. Social workers receiving supervision for the purposes of licensure have a responsibility to become familiar with these definitions and meet the requirements. Third-party payers and professional entities may have additional requirements that need to be followed.

Social workers should retain a qualified supervisor or consultant for technology concerns that may arise. When using technology for client services, proper training should be obtained to become familiar with the technologies being used. 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.

Standard 10. Continuing Education

Social workers shall adhere to the NASW *Standards for Continuing Professional Education* and follow applicable licensing laws regarding continuing education delivered via electronic means.

Interpretation

Continuing education represents learning opportunities beyond the entry-level degree to enable social workers to increase their skill proficiency and level of knowledge. Typically, social work continuing education is a self-directed process in which social workers should assume responsibility for their own professional development. Examples of technology-based continuing education can include any courses, lectures, seminars, etc., mediated by technology, including, but not limited to computer-based training, online courses, Web-based or satellite televised workshops/seminars. In taking or instructing continuing education programs via technology, access issues demand particular attention: Participants should be able to access technical support services as well as social work professionals who can answer content questions. Online scoring systems should provide feedback to the participant. It is also essential to maintain course records as a backup in case of technology failure. Providers should develop a method to authenticate users with professional license number or NASW membership number.

Glossary of Terms

Client: The individual, group, family, organization, or community that seeks or is provided with professional social work services.

Confidentiality: A basic principle of social work intervention and counseling. It ensures the client system that the social worker client–relationship and information provided by the client will remain private unless the client gives written authorization to the social worker for its release.

Electronic: A mode of communication and information acquisition, transmission, and storage, such as used in computers, telephones, cell phones, personal digital assistants, facsimile machines, etc.

HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996): A set of standards that protects electronic health information through the implementation of privacy and security rules and the establishment of electronic transactions and code sets. It also ensures the continuity of health insurance coverage and increases federal and state governments' enforcement authority over protected health information.

Information Technology (IT): The overarching term to describe technologies that process information, most often in electronic form.

Internet: A worldwide network of computer networks that share information.

Online: A mode of communication where the user is in direct contact with the computer network to the extent that the network responds rapidly to user commands.

Privacy: The right of an individual to withhold her/his information from public scrutiny or unwanted publicity.

Risk Management: The practice of competent social work services and accurate documentation of practice decisions and interventions to avoid litigation.

Security: The protection of hardware, software, and data by locks, doors, and other electronic barriers such as passwords, firewalls, and encryption.

Technology: A set of prescribed events that are embedded in hardware, software, or telecommunications and that direct activities, decisions, or choices. Sometimes technology is divided into hard technologies, such as switches and electronics, and soft technology such as the processes and procedures associated with accounting or risk assessment.

World Wide Web (WWW or **Web):** A subset of the Internet that allows access using a standard graphical protocol.

Resources

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