



SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL SERVICE PROFESSIONS

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NOTICE TO all *social workers, social auxiliary workers, student social workers and student social auxiliary workers*

INTERIM ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA REGARDING TECHNOLOGY-SUPPORTED SOCIAL WORK SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Social workers, like other disciplines, are challenged to embrace the use of information and communication technology-supported interventions and services to address emerging issues, challenges and risks in society. The use of technology can transform social work practice through provision of flexible, on-demand and individually tailored and paced services. The efficacy of technology-supported services and face-to-face services are comparable with the added advantage of increased accessibility. Technology supported interventions are accepted to be more cost effective.
- 1.2 In this document “technology-supported interventions or services” is used synonymously with “e-social work”, to refer to social work services that are rendered primarily through digital means, such as video (e.g., Skype and WhatsApp video), voice (e.g., telephone, mobile phone and WhatsApp call) or text (e.g., email, SMS and WhatsApp messaging).
- 1.4 Simultaneously, the use of technology-supported interventions and services highlights digital divides, competency and ethical issues. The key question in the use of technology - supported interventions and services is the same as for any social work practice: how can technology be used to ensure effective services, whilst limiting the risk of harm to clients and social workers, especially during times of emergencies?
- 1.5 The global *COVID-19 pandemic* is just such an emergency. However, key measures of prevention of the spread of the disease are self-isolation and social distancing. Social workers are thus faced by an ethical dilemma of adhering to preventative measures whilst providing services to the greatest extent possible. Social workers therefore must find innovative ways to be on the frontline of promotive, preventative and treatment services to ensure the wellbeing of the individual and society. Technology-supported interventions and services are a useful tool to overcome isolation and to provide continued services.

2. TECHNOLOGY-SUPPORTED SOCIAL WORK SERVICES AND EXISTING POLICY GUIDELINES

- 2.1 This interim guideline document must be read with the *Policy Guidelines for course of conduct, code of ethics and the rules for social workers* (hereafter referred to as Policy

Guidelines) as well as the *Rules in relation to the acts or omissions of a social worker, social auxiliary worker or a student social worker which shall constitute unprofessional conduct* (hereafter refer to as Rules). The basic premise is that the standards of professional conduct for social workers (including social work educators, trainers and supervisors) are the same irrespective of whether services are provided face-to-face or online.

2.2 Due to the immediate crisis of the COVID-19 lockdown, **these guidelines will be applicable with immediate effect**. The guidelines will be reviewed more thoroughly by the sector in due course.

2.3 *Policy Guideline 5.2* describes social workers' ethical responsibility to the broader society and refers to the *Rules* relating to the course of conduct that concerns the community. *Policy Guideline 5.5.2* describes that the specific responsibility of social workers in terms of public emergencies is to provide appropriate professional services to the greatest extent possible.

3. PURPOSE

3.1 The purpose of the guidelines is to expand the options for interacting and communicating with clients in an accessible and ethical way by:

- (a) guiding practitioners who provide technology-supported social work services; and
- (b) strengthening protection of clients who receive technology-supported social work services.

3. GUIDELINES

The following guidelines provide standards for social workers' professional conduct when using technology in social work service delivery, within the existing framework of the *Policy Guidelines*:

3.1 Ethical responsibilities to the profession

3.1.1 Integrity of the profession

- (a) The social worker will be registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) and must be able to provide proof of registration to clients. Clients must be able to verify the identity and registration of the social worker on the SACSSP database online or by contacting the SACSSP offices.
- (b) When unavailable to render continued services to existing clients, the social worker will make alternative resources available for continuity of services, by means of technology-supported services and/or referral to another social worker or organisation.
- (c) If the social worker provides technology-supported services to clients in another country, proof of registration/accreditation in the country of the client must be provided.

3.1.2 Negligence

- (a) The social worker will select appropriate technology to deliver relevant services. Using only text-based service delivery does not comply with general accepted standards of practice. A combination of text and telephonic and/or video delivery is required.
- (b) The social worker will ensure that their technology-supported social work services are covered by their professional indemnity insurance, if applicable.

3.1.3 Competency

- (a) The social worker will keep up to date with emerging knowledge on and be competent to use technologies supporting e-social work.
- (b) As e-social work and the provision of technology-supported social work services is an emerging area of practice, the social worker will exercise careful judgement and take responsible steps (for example appropriate education, research, training, consultation and supervision) to ensure competence in their work and to protect clients from harm.
- (c) The social worker will keep up to date with relevant studies on the effectiveness of technology-supported social work practice and on the evidence of best practices regarding the use of technology to support practice.
- (d) The social worker practising e-social work will have a minimum of 2 to 3 years supervised practice experience or be a student social worker working under supervision.
- (e) The social worker will undertake training to understand the technology used in e-social work, including different platforms and applications, security and possible technical problems such as loss of power, viruses, hardware failures, image and/or sound distortions.
- (f) The social worker will be aware of the effectiveness and evidence of technology-supported services, as well as the ethical implications and potential benefits and risks.
- (g) The social worker will be able to provide guidance to the client (student, supervisee) on the effective use of technology when contracting for this mode of service delivery. This will include the management of basic technical problems which may cause disruptions of the process. The social worker will suggest an alternative when such problems interrupt or prematurely end a contact with the client.
- (h) The social worker practising e-social work should annually obtain a minimum of 5 Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points in the field of e-social work and technology used.

3.1.4 Compliance with legislation, policies and procedures

- (a) The social worker will have a sound knowledge and understanding of legislation, policies and procedure on the use of technology in providing social work services, access to and protection of electronic information and data, e.g. the Protection of Personal Information Act.

3.2 Ethical responsibilities towards the client system

3.2.1 Informed consent

- (a) The social worker will inform clients of the potential benefits, limitations and risks of technology-supported services, as well as how the technology works and what will be required from the client for access.
- (b) The social worker will inform the client in writing on how technology will be used to record, gather, manage and store client information.
- (c) The social worker will inform the client in writing about working hours and alternative resources for when the social worker is not available due to reasons such as illness.
- (d) The social worker will obtain the signed, written consent from the client electronically (e.g. via email or text message) for the use of technology-supported services.

- (e) The social worker will, in the case of a minor child, obtain signed, written consent electronically from at least one parent with parental responsibility for the child.

3.2.2 Services to children without the consent of the parent

- (a) When a child (younger than 18 years) reaches out directly to the social worker to report a matter or ask for services, without the knowledge or consent of the parents or legal guardian, the social worker will apply the following three interrelated principles to make professional determination regarding parental consent:
 - (i) Firstly, obtaining parental consent prior to the commencement of any social work service is the default ethical principle, but there may be other considerations that outweigh this;
 - (ii) Secondly, the child's Constitutional right, in terms of section 28(1)(d), to 'social services' need to be respected, with or without the consent of the parent.
 - (iii) Thirdly, the best interest of the child as safeguarded in section 28(2) of the Constitution as well as section 2(2)(iv) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 should be the determining principle, weighing all circumstances, factor, consequences and the child's social, emotional, psychological or physical safety.

3.2.3 Confidentiality

- (a) The social worker will provide the assurance to the client that all reasonable steps will be taken to keep confidential any information shared in the process of provision of services between the parties involved.
- (b) The social worker will select technologies (i.e. programmes or apps) that have a sound reputation for privacy, encryption and data security.
- (c) The social worker will inform or educate clients on the importance of encryption of messages, the use of firewalls, malware and secure passwords, and the use of private spaces for communication.
- (d) The social worker will inform the client of any exceptions which require disclosure and that the client will be informed of such exceptions when they occur.
- (e) The social worker will take reasonable steps to ensure privacy and safeguarding of confidential information and communication through encryptions, firewalls, the use of malware-protection software (e.g., Norton Antivirus) and the use of secure passwords.
- (f) The social worker will ensure reasonable access for the client to the social worker's electronic information regarding the client, taking into consideration the best interest of the client.
- (g) The social worker will take reasonable steps to ensure confidential information is gathered, managed and stored in accordance with legislation and policies.
- (h) The social worker will take reasonable steps to protect confidentiality when, with the consent of the client, information is shared electronically with other parties.
- (i) The social worker will develop and communicate procedures on how clients will be notified of any breach of confidential records.
- (j) The social worker will take reasonable steps to dispose obsolete electronic devices in ways that protect their clients, employer, themselves and the environment.

3.2.4 Professional relationships

- (a) The social worker will draw a clear distinction with the client between personal and professional communication and ensure that the professional relationship and boundaries are maintained.
- (b) The social worker will identify risks, areas of doubt and emergencies which should not be addressed through technology-supported services and clearly communicate with the client alternatives and procedures to address through face-to-face services.
- (c) The social worker will inform clients of boundaries in terms of hours for electronic communication.

3.2.5 Billing (fees and financial arrangements)

- (a) The social worker will disclose tariffs and payment agreements for services before finalising the contract with the client. The payment agreement must include the cancellation policy.
- (b) The social worker may require payment for technology-supported services after confirmation of appointment. The social worker may charge for missed scheduled sessions, if the client did not cancel in advance.
- (c) Billing should fall within a reasonable range for the nature of the services rendered.
- (d) When applicable, the social worker will confirm that medical aids do allow for payment of technology-supported social work services before contracting with the client. (This will depend on whether the client does have a medical aid and wishes to use it, which will require the social worker to be registered with the Board of Healthcare Funders.)
- (e) The social worker will provide an invoice that clearly reflects the nature of the services provided and the information of the provider. If applicable, the invoice must adhere to the requirements of the different medical aid schemes to enable clients to claim for the social work services they have received.
- (f) The social worker will provide different secure options for payment.

3.3 Ethical responsibilities towards colleagues

3.3.1 Respect

- (a) The social worker will respect the competence and expertise of social work colleagues and other professionals and refer clients who can benefit from their competence, when required.

3.3.2 Confidentiality

- (a) The social worker will respect and keep private any confidential information shared by colleagues.
- (b) The social worker will ensure that colleagues understand the obligation to respect confidentiality and that any disclosure will only take place with the written informed consent of the client.

3.4 Ethical responsibilities to the broader society

3.4.1 Public emergencies

(a) When, due to a public emergency (e.g., the COVID-19 national lockdown), it is not possible to provide appropriate face-to-face services, the social worker will develop and provide technology-supported services to the greatest extent possible.

3.4.2 Social and political action

(a) The social worker may engage in social action to ensure equal access to social work services, including technology-supported services, to expand the choice and opportunities for clients to access social work services.

5. KEY TERMS

Key terms related to the use of electronic technology in various areas of social work practice used in this document are sourced from the *NASW, ASWB, CSWE, and CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice*, June 2017.

Electronic communication. Using Web sites, mobile phones, e-mail, texting, online social networking, video or other electronic methods and technology to send and receive messages, or to post information so that it can be retrieved by others or used later.

Electronic social work services. The use of computers, mobile phones, video technology and other means of communication and information, acquisition, transmission and storage used on the Internet and with other technology to (a) provide information to the public; (b) deliver services to clients; (c) gather, manage, and store information about clients; and (d) educate, supervise and train social workers.

Encryption. The process used to protect the privacy of electronic transmissions of information by converting the information into a code (preventing unauthorized people from gaining access to the information).

Information and communication technology supported interventions/services. Any social work intervention/service rendered using e-mail, text messages, online counselling, telephone counselling, videoconferencing, self-guided Web-based interventions, electronic social networks, mobile applications and automated tutorials.

Security. The protection of hardware, software and data through physical forms of protection (for example, locks, doors, padded cases, waterproofing) and electronic forms of protection (for example passwords, firewalls, encryption).

Technology. Any electronic device or program that may be used to communicate, gather, store, analyse or share information (for example, computers, mobile phones, tablets, facsimile machines, smart watches, monitors, Web sites, social networking applications and computer software).

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