

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS  
ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORK BOARDS  
COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION  
CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK ASSOCIATION

NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for

# Technology

---

in Social Work Practice





NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for

# Technology

---

in Social Work Practice

## **National Association of Social Workers**

Darrell P. Wheeler, PhD, MPH, ACSW – President

Angelo McClain, PhD, LICSW – Chief Executive Officer

## **Association of Social Work Boards**

M. Jenise Comer, LCSW, MSW, ACSW – President

Mary Jo Monahan, MSW, LCSW – Chief Executive Officer

## **Council on Social Work Education**

Darla Spence Coffey, PhD, MSW – President & Chief Executive Officer

## **Clinical Social Work Association**

Melissa Johnson, LCSW – President & Chief Executive Officer

## **Technology Standards Task Force**

Frederic G. Reamer, PhD – Chair

Allan Edward Barsky, PhD, JD, MSW

M. Jenise Comer, MSW, LCSW, ACSW

Laura W. Groshong, LICSW

Dawn M. Hobdy, LICSW

Dwight J. Hymans, MSW, LCSW, ACSW

Mary Jo Monahan, MSW, LCSW

Jo Ann R. Regan, PhD, MSW

## **Technology Standards Sub–Task Force Advisory Group**

Robert Vernon, PhD – Chair

Julie Gilliam, ScD, MS, BSW

Brooke Goodwin, MSW, LICSW

Ruby Guillen, MSW, BCIS

Elise Johnson, MSW, LCSW

## **NASW Staff**

Mirean Coleman, MSW, LICSW, CT – Clinical Manager

## About the Associations

The **National Association of Social Workers (NASW)** is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the nation. Membership in NASW includes over 130,000 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. NASW's primary functions include promoting the professional development of its members, establishing and maintaining professional standards of practice, advancing sound social policies, and providing services that protect its members and enhance their professional status.

The **Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB)** is the nonprofit organization of social work regulatory bodies in the United States and Canada, including all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and all 10 Canadian provinces. ASWB's mission is to strengthen protection of the public by providing support and services to the social work regulatory community to advance safe, competent, and ethical practices. In March 2015, ASWB published *Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* that were developed by an international task force of social work regulators and subject matter experts convened by ASWB. These standards provided the foundation for the development of this edition of *Technology Standards in Social Work Practice*. ASWB's current initiative is developing and implementing a plan to achieve social work practice mobility and licensure portability for social work practitioners in the United States.

The **Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)** is a nonprofit national association representing more than 2,500 individual members as well as graduate and undergraduate programs of professional social work education. Founded in 1952, this partnership of educational and professional institutions, social welfare agencies, and private citizens is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation as the sole accrediting agency for social work education in this country.

The **Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA)** is a national individual membership organization dedicated to providing to its members information and professional support on the ethical and educational basis of clinical social work, and advocacy at the state and national level for access to clinical social work mental health services. The association membership includes clinical social workers, new professionals (clinical social workers who have graduated within the last four years), emeritus members, and students.

## Foreword

NASW partnered with ASWB, CSWE, and CSWA to develop a uniform set of technology standards for professional social workers to use as a guide in their practice. The four associations formed the Task Force for Technology Standards in Social Work Practice and jointly developed the *Technology Standards in Social Work Practice*.

The task force met for almost two years reviewing technology literature in social work services and emerging standards in multiple professions. The task force also reviewed relevant statutes and licensing regulations in various jurisdictions. Multiple drafts were prepared and a draft was released for public comment during the summer of 2016. Many comments were received from individual social workers, social work academicians, and groups including the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare) and representatives of a Web-based macro social work group.

The task force thoroughly reviewed and discussed every submitted comment and revised the draft accordingly. Based on the comments received, the task force established a sub-task force advisory group consisting of social work professionals with extensive technology-related expertise and experience. This group submitted a favorable review of the standards and offered recommendations that the full task force reviewed, discussed, and incorporated into the draft.

In developing these standards, the Task Force for Technology Standards in Social Work Practice used several foundation documents, including the NASW *Code of Ethics* and the ASWB *Model Social Work Practice Act*, along with many other sources. The standards use a humanistic framework to ensure that ethical social work practice can be enhanced by the appropriate use of technology.

NASW wishes to thank the task force and the sub-task force advisory group for their persistence and hard work in the development of this document.

## Contents

7	<b>Introduction</b>
10	<b>Section 1: Provision of Information to the Public</b>
10	Standard 1.01: Ethics and Values
10	Standard 1.02: Representation of Self and Accuracy of Information
11	<b>Section 2: Designing and Delivering Services</b>
11	Standard 2.01: Ethical Use of Technology to Deliver Social Work Services
12	Standard 2.02: Services Requiring Licensure or Other Forms of Accreditation
14	Standard 2.03: Laws That Govern Provision of Social Work Services
14	Standard 2.04: Informed Consent: Discussing the Benefits and Risks of Providing Electronic Social Work Services
15	Standard 2.05: Assessing Clients' Relationships with Technology
16	Standard 2.06: Competence: Knowledge and Skills Required When Using Technology to Provide Services
16	Standard 2.07: Confidentiality and the Use of Technology
17	Standard 2.08: Electronic Payments and Claims
17	Standard 2.09: Maintaining Professional Boundaries
18	Standard 2.10: Social Media Policy
19	Standard 2.11: Use of Personal Technology for Work Purposes
19	Standard 2.12: Unplanned Interruptions of Electronic Social Work Services
20	Standard 2.13: Responsibility in Emergency Circumstances
20	Standard 2.14: Electronic and Online Testimonials
21	Standard 2.15: Organizing and Advocacy
22	Standard 2.16: Fundraising
23	Standard 2.17: Primary Commitment to Clients
23	Standard 2.18: Confidentiality
24	Standard 2.19: Appropriate Boundaries
25	Standard 2.20: Addressing Unique Needs
26	Standard 2.21: Access to Technology

27	Standard 2.22: Programmatic Needs Assessments and Evaluations
28	Standard 2.23: Current Knowledge and Competence
28	Standard 2.24: Control of Messages
29	Standard 2.25: Administration
29	Standard 2.26: Conducting Online Research
30	Standard 2.27: Social Media Policies
30	<b>Section 3: Gathering, Managing, and Storing Information</b>
31	Standard 3.01: Informed Consent
32	Standard 3.02: Separation of Personal and Professional Communications
33	Standard 3.03: Handling Confidential Information
35	Standard 3.04: Access to Records within an Organization
35	Standard 3.05: Breach of Confidentiality
36	Standard 3.06: Credibility of Information Gathered Electronically
36	Standard 3.07: Sharing Information with Other Parties
37	Standard 3.08: Client Access to Own Records
38	Standard 3.09: Using Search Engines to Locate Information about Clients
40	Standard 3.10: Using Search Engines to Locate Information about Professional Colleagues
41	Standard 3.11: Treating Colleagues with Respect
42	Standard 3.12: Open Access Information
43	Standard 3.13: Accessing Client Records Remotely
43	Standard 3.14: Managing Phased Out and Outdated Electronic Devices
44	<b>Section 4: Social Work Education and Supervision</b>
45	Standard 4.01: Use of Technology in Social Work Education
46	Standard 4.02: Training Social Workers about the Use of Technology in Practice
48	Standard 4.03: Continuing Education
48	Standard 4.04: Social Media Policies
49	Standard 4.05: Evaluation
49	Standard 4.06: Technological Disruptions
50	Standard 4.07: Distance Education
50	Standard 4.08: Support
51	Standard 4.09: Maintenance of Academic Standards
51	Standard 4.10: Educator–Student Boundaries
52	Standard 4.11: Field Instruction
53	Standard 4.12: Social Work Supervision
53	<b>Glossary</b>
57	<b>Resources</b>



Social workers' use of technology is proliferating. Technology has transformed the nature of social work practice and greatly expanded social workers' ability to assist people in need. Contemporary social workers can provide services to individual clients by using online counseling, telephone counseling, videoconferencing, self-guided Web-based interventions, electronic social networks, mobile apps, automated tutorials, e-mail, text messages, and a host of other services. Social workers' use of technology has created new ways to interact and communicate with clients, raising fundamentally new questions about the meaning of the social worker–client relationship.

In addition, social workers use various forms of technology to access, gather, and otherwise manage information about clients. Social workers maintain encrypted electronic records, store sensitive information on their smartphones and in the “cloud,” and have the capacity to search for information about clients using Internet search engines. Social workers use technology in creative ways to address compelling social justice issues, organize communities, administer organizations, and develop social policy. Social workers also explore and develop new technologies for practice and disseminate them with colleagues.

Technology has also influenced social work education and broadened its reach. Today's students may take courses online, view prerecorded lectures posted on Internet-based course sites, participate in online social work practice simulations, interact with fellow students enrolled in a course from multiple locations around the world, and listen to podcasts. Social workers have expanded options to satisfy their continuing education requirements by enrolling in live online webinars and attending lectures

delivered from remote locations that are transmitted electronically. They may provide and obtain training, supervision, and consultation from distant locations using videoconferencing technology.

These dramatic developments require practice standards in technology. The following standards are divided into four main sections and address social workers' use of electronic technology to (1) provide information to the public; (2) design and deliver services; (3) gather, manage, store, and access information about clients; and (4) educate and supervise social workers. These standards are designed to guide social workers' use of technology; enhance social workers' awareness of their ethical responsibilities when using technology; and inform social workers, employers, and the public about practice standards pertaining to social workers' use of technology. Social workers should consider these standards in conjunction with the *NASW Code of Ethics*, other social work standards and relevant statutes, and regulations. As new forms of technology continue to emerge, the standards provided here should be adapted as needed.

Each practice standard provides social workers with general guidance on how to use technology in an ethical manner; the "interpretation" sections offer suggestions for implementing these standards in a wide range of circumstances and social work settings. The interpretations provide examples of factors that social workers may consider when making decisions about the appropriate use of technology. The standards and their interpretations are intended to set a minimum core of excellence for professional practice when social workers use technology and to provide a framework to address possible benefits, challenges, and risks that arise when using technology. These guidelines are not intended to suggest that the use of technology is inherently riskier or more problematic than other forms of social work.

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

These standards address a wide range of key concepts related to social workers' use of technology. By necessity, some concepts (for example, informed consent, confidentiality, boundaries, social media policies) are discussed in multiple places in the document. Readers are encouraged to review the document in its entirety.

## Section 1: Provision of Information to the Public

Social workers who use technology to provide information to the public about the services they offer and on social work topics of general interest, and who engage in social advocacy, should uphold the values of the profession and adhere to the following standards.

### **Standard 1.01: Ethics and Values**

**When social workers use technology to provide information to the public, they shall take reasonable steps to ensure that the information is accurate, respectful, and consistent with the *NASW Code of Ethics*.**

#### **Interpretation**

When communicating with the public using Web sites, blogs, social media, or other forms of electronic communication, social workers should make every effort to ensure that the information reflects the values, ethics, and mission of the profession. Social workers should consult relevant standards in the *NASW Code of Ethics* for guidance (especially related to competence; conflicts of interest; privacy and confidentiality; respect; dishonesty, fraud, and deception; misrepresentation; solicitations; private conduct; and acknowledging credit).

### **Standard 1.02: Representation of Self and Accuracy of Information**

**When social workers use technology to provide information to the public, they shall take reasonable steps to ensure the accuracy and validity of the information they disseminate.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers should post information from trustworthy sources, having ensured the accuracy and appropriateness of the material. They should advertise only those electronic services they are licensed or certified and trained to provide in their areas of competence. Social workers should periodically review information posted online by

themselves or other parties to ensure that their professional credentials and other information are accurately portrayed. Social workers should make reasonable effort to correct inaccuracies.

## **Section 2: Designing and Delivering Services**

### **Part A: Individuals, Families, and Groups**

Technology may be used to facilitate various forms of services, including counseling, case management, support, and other social work functions. Technology may also be used to facilitate communication with clients, obtain information from clients, provide information to clients, and facilitate various interventions.

The ability to provide services electronically has many benefits as well as risks that social workers should consider. Social workers who use technology to provide services should assess whether clients will benefit from receiving services through electronic means and, when appropriate, offer alternative methods of service delivery.

### **Standard 2.01: Ethical Use of Technology to Deliver Social Work Services**

**When providing services to individuals, families, or groups using technology, social workers shall follow the *NASW Code of Ethics* just as they would when providing services to clients in person.**

#### **Interpretation**

When using technology to provide services, practitioner competence and the well-being of the client remain primary. Social workers who use technology to provide services should evaluate their ability to

- assess the relative benefits and risks of providing social work services using technology (for example, in-person services may be necessary when clients pose a significant risk of self-harm or injurious behavior, are cognitively impaired, require

sustained support by a social worker with whom they have an ongoing professional relationship, or are in crisis)

- reasonably ensure that electronic social work services can be kept confidential. For example, the information provided by the client should only be accessible by those who require access and that the host of the server used for electronic communication agrees to abide by the privacy policies of the social worker
- reasonably ensure that they maintain clear professional boundaries (for example, social workers should be mindful of boundary confusion that may result if they disclose personal information about themselves or others in an online setting to which clients have access)
- confirm the identity of the client to whom services are provided electronically at the onset of each contact with the client (examples include confirming a client's online consent with a telephone call; providing the client with a password, passcode, or image that is specifically for the client's use when providing consent electronically)
- assess individuals' familiarity and comfort with technology, access to the Internet, language translation software, and the use of technology to meet the needs of diverse populations, such as people with differing physical abilities

## **Standard 2.02: Services Requiring Licensure or Other Forms of Accreditation**

**Social workers who provide electronic social work services shall comply with the laws and regulations that govern electronic social work services within both the jurisdiction in which the social worker is located and in which the client is located.**

### **Interpretation**

Social workers should be aware of all laws, regulations, and other rules that govern their work using technology, particularly licensure

laws. Most jurisdictions have adopted the position that electronic social work practice takes place in both the jurisdiction where the client is receiving such services (irrespective of the location of the practitioner) and in the jurisdiction where the social worker is licensed and located at the time of providing such electronic services (irrespective of the location of the client). If the client and social worker are in different jurisdictions, the social worker should be aware of and comply with the laws in both the jurisdiction where the social worker is located and where the client is located.

Here are some examples:

- The social worker and client are initially located in one jurisdiction and the client moves to another jurisdiction to attend college. It is the social worker's responsibility to contact the other jurisdiction's regulatory board to determine what requirements are necessary to provide services legally in that jurisdiction. The other jurisdiction may allow for temporary practice for a duly licensed social worker who they determine meets "substantial equivalency."
- The social worker is traveling for an extended time outside of the jurisdiction where she is licensed. A client asks the social worker to provide electronic services during the social worker's absence. It is the social worker's responsibility to contact the local jurisdiction's regulatory board to determine what is required for the social worker to provide services legally in that jurisdiction.
- The social worker is employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or the U.S. military and provides electronic services under the auspices of those organizations. The laws and rules of these national organizations apply and are recognized by the jurisdiction(s) in which the social worker and client are located.

### **Standard 2.03: Laws That Govern Provision of Social Work Services**

**Social workers who provide social work services using technology shall understand, comply, and stay current with any and all laws that govern the provision of social work services and inform clients of the social worker's legal obligations, just as they would when providing services in person.**

#### **Interpretation**

In addition to professional regulation and licensure laws, there are many other jurisdictional laws that social workers need to understand, comply with, and inform clients of. It is the social worker's responsibility to comply with existing laws and keep apprised of new legislation. Specific obligations may include mandatory reporting of suspected abuse or neglect of a child, older adult, or person with a disability; a practitioner's verbal or electronic sexual communication with a client; a practitioner's impairment in the ability to practice by reason of illness, use of alcohol or drugs, or as a result of mental or physical conditions; or a practitioner's improper or fraudulent billing practices. Social workers should also be familiar with other laws governing social work practice, such as those related to mental health, addictions, duty to protect clients and third parties, and social worker–client privilege.

### **Standard 2.04: Informed Consent: Discussing the Benefits and Risks of Providing Electronic Social Work Services**

**When providing social work services using technology, social workers shall inform the client of relevant benefits and risks.**

#### **Interpretation**

Possible benefits of providing social work services through electronic means include

- enhancing access to social work services that are unavailable in person because of geographical distance, clients' disabilities, or illnesses



- real-time monitoring of clients' status, when appropriate
- being able to respond to clients rapidly
- enhancing access to services because of clients' scheduling challenges
- providing more cost-effective delivery of social work services
- ease of communication
- reducing the frequency of clients' travel to obtain social work services

Possible risks of providing social work services through electronic means include

- potential for technology failure and interruption of services
- potential for confidentiality breaches
- prevention of unauthorized use or unethical purposes
- higher cost of technology

### **Standard 2.05: Assessing Clients' Relationships with Technology**

**When conducting psychosocial assessments with clients, social workers shall consider clients' views about technology and the ways in which they use technology, including strengths, needs, risks, and challenges.**

#### **Interpretation**

Historically, social workers have been taught to assess the psychosocial well-being of clients in the context of their environment, including relationships with family members, peers, neighbors, and coworkers. With the increasing use of technology in society, it is important for social workers to also consider clients' relationships and comfort with technology. Such assessments could include client strengths, such as access to particular forms of technology and the ability to use technology for family, work, school, social, recreational, and other purposes. In addition, social workers should consider relevant needs, risks, and challenges, such as clients' reluctance to use technology; difficulty affording technology; limited computer knowledge or fluency with

technology; and the risk of cyberbullying, electronic identity theft, and compulsive behaviors regarding the use of technology.

### **Standard 2.06: Competence: Knowledge and Skills Required When Using Technology to Provide Services**

**Social workers who use technology to provide services shall obtain and maintain the knowledge and skills required to do so in a safe, competent, and ethical manner.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers who provide electronic services should be competent in the use of technology and maintain competency through relevant continuing education, consultation, supervision, and training. Social workers should continuously learn about changes in technology used to provide these services. Competence depends on the type of technology and how it is used, and may include knowing how to

- communicate effectively while using the technology to provide social work services
- handle emergency situations from a remote location
- apply the laws of both the social worker's and client's location
- be sensitive to the client's culture, including the client's cultural community and linguistic, social, and economic environment
- attend to clients' unique needs and challenges
- ensure that the technology is in working order to provide effective services and avoid disruption
- keep abreast of the changing landscape of technology and adapt accordingly

### **Standard 2.07: Confidentiality and the Use of Technology**

**When using technology to deliver services, social workers shall establish and maintain confidentiality policies and procedures consistent with relevant statutes, regulations, rules, and ethical standards.**

### **Interpretation**

Social workers who provide electronic services should develop protocols and policies to protect client confidentiality. They should use encryption software and firewalls and periodically assess confidentiality policies and procedures to ensure compliance with statutes, regulations, and social work standards.

### **Standard 2.08: Electronic Payments and Claims**

**Social workers who submit insurance claims for payment electronically shall take reasonable steps to ensure that business associates use proper encryption and have confidentiality policies and procedures consistent with social work standards and relevant laws.**

### **Interpretation**

The processing of electronic claims and payments includes information about the client that should be protected. Use of electronic payment systems should comply with social work confidentiality standards and relevant statutes and regulations.

### **Standard 2.09: Maintaining Professional Boundaries**

**Social workers who provide electronic social work services shall maintain clear professional boundaries in their relationships with clients.**

### **Interpretation**

Social workers who use technology to provide services should take reasonable steps to prevent client access to social workers' personal social networking sites and should not post personal information on professional Web sites, blogs, or other forms of social media, to avoid boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships. Although social workers have a right to freedom of speech, they should be aware of how their personal communications could affect their professional relationships.

When using technology, social workers should make distinctions between professional and personal communications. Social workers should not post any identifying or confidential information about clients on professional Web sites, blogs, or other forms of social media.

Social workers should be aware that they and their clients may share “friend” networks on Web sites, blogs, and other forms of social media; social workers may or may not realize they have these shared online connections. Social workers should be aware that shared membership in online groups based on race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, religion, addiction recovery, or personal interests may create boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships and should avoid relationships that are likely to lead to a conflict of interest, particularly when there is risk of harm to the client (for example, if the online social relationship may compromise the social worker’s ability to maintain a clear professional–client relationship).

### **Standard 2.10: Social Media Policy**

**Social workers who use social media shall develop a social media policy that they share with clients.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social media policies inform clients regarding their social worker’s professional use of social networking sites, e-mail, text messaging, electronic search engines, smartphone applications, blogs, business review sites, and other forms of electronic communication. A carefully constructed social media policy that social workers share with clients can enhance protection of private information and maintain clear boundaries. The social media policy should be reviewed with clients during the initial interview in the social worker–client relationship and revisited and updated as needed.

### **Standard 2.11: Use of Personal Technology for Work Purposes**

**Social workers shall consider the implications of their use of personal mobile phones and other electronic communication devices for work purposes.**

#### **Interpretation**

If a social worker's employment setting expects the social worker to use mobile phones or other technology to communicate with clients, ideally the employer or organization should provide the devices and technology and have clear policies regarding clients' electronic access to the social worker. As a matter of fairness, employers should cover the costs of the devices and technology that are required for social workers to fulfill their work obligations. Providing clients with the personal mobile phone number of the social worker might limit the social worker's ability to maintain appropriate boundaries with clients and compromise client confidentiality. In situations where social workers use personal mobile phones or other electronic communication devices for work purposes, they should take reasonable steps to protect confidentiality and maintain appropriate boundaries.

### **Standard 2.12: Unplanned Interruptions of Electronic Social Work Services**

**Social workers shall plan for the possibility that electronic services will be interrupted unexpectedly.**

#### **Interpretation**

Electronic social work services can be interrupted unexpectedly in a variety of ways. Technology failure is always a possibility, especially as a result of power outages or lost, damaged, or stolen devices. Social workers should develop policies on how to manage technology failures and discuss them with clients at the beginning of their relationship. Social workers should have specific backup plans to handle technological failures or interruptions in services during emergency or crisis situations. If such failures

interfere with a social worker's ability to assist clients (including difficulty clients may have managing technology failures), social workers should consider seeing the client in person or referring clients to service providers who can assist the client in person.

### **Standard 2.13: Responsibility in Emergency Circumstances**

**Social workers who provide electronic services shall be familiar with emergency services in the jurisdiction where the client is located and share this information with clients.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers who provide electronic services may have clients who encounter emergencies or crisis situations. Some crisis services may be provided remotely, but others may require in-person communication or intervention. Social workers should take reasonable steps to identify the location of the client and emergency services in the jurisdiction. If the social worker believes that a client may be at risk (for example, having suicidal thoughts), the social worker should mobilize resources to defuse the risks and restore safety. Social workers should develop policies on emergency situations that include an authorized contact person whom the social worker has permission to contact.

### **Standard 2.14: Electronic and Online Testimonials**

**Social workers shall refrain from soliciting electronic or online testimonials from clients or former clients who, because of their particular circumstances, are vulnerable to undue influence.**

#### **Interpretation**

Electronic and online testimonials about social work services (including text, audio, or video) create the potential for boundary confusion and conflicts of interest. Social workers should not solicit testimonial endorsements (including solicitation of consent to use a client's prior statement as a testimonial endorsement) from

current or former clients who, because of their particular circumstances, are vulnerable to undue influence.

## **Part B: Communities, Organizations, Administration, and Policy**

Technology can greatly enhance social workers' ability to engage in social action, promote social justice, work with communities, administer organizations, and develop social policy. This section provides social workers with guidance on the use of technology in the context of social work with larger systems. In these contexts, social workers may use technology for various purposes, including

- engaging, empowering, and organizing community members and groups
- coalition and capacity building
- advocating for changes in social policy to improve the social and economic well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities
- providing supervision to social workers, other professionals, and volunteers
- planning, implementing, managing, and evaluating social programs

### **Standard 2.15: Organizing and Advocacy**

**When using technology to organize communities and advocate, social workers shall take reasonable steps to ensure that the information shared using technological tools is honest, accurate, and respectful.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers have a rich heritage advocating for social change; engaging in policy practice; and improving the services provided to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers use Web sites, online social networking, and other electronic communications to mobilize and organize communities and advocate about policy issues. Social workers who use thought-provoking language and stories to attract attention and motivate people to action should ensure that the content of their communications is honest,

accurate, respectful, and is neither exploitative of clients nor sensationalistic.

When social workers establish or facilitate online communities, they should inform participants that information shared with the community may be open to the public. Social workers should also establish and maintain rules of “netiquette,” that is, guidelines for respectful communication within the online community.

Social workers may use technology to communicate political messages and mobilize clients, colleagues, and citizens to engage in social action and monitor legislative activities. As with in-person advocacy and communication, social workers who use technology for these purposes should do so respectfully and in a manner that is consistent with professional, legal, and ethical standards. Social workers should not use technology to harass, threaten, insult, or coerce individuals or groups.

#### **Standard 2.16: Fundraising**

**When social workers use technology for fundraising, they shall take reasonable steps to ensure that information provided to potential donors clearly and accurately identifies the purposes of the fundraising and how the funds will be used.**

#### **Interpretation**

Using technology for fundraising may open up new and broad channels for raising money for social work services or other causes. As with any fundraising, social workers should use honest, accurate, and respectful language to explain why they are fundraising, including information about the intended beneficiaries and how the funding will be used to help them. Social workers should ensure that the system used to collect payment is secure, so that the donors’ confidential information is protected and the funds collected are used only for the intended purposes.



Because technology allows fundraising from various states or countries, social workers should consider jurisdictional issues pertaining to fundraising (for example, tax laws, laws governing charitable donation status, and laws pertaining to support for causes or groups deemed to be related to terrorist organizations).

**Standard 2.17: Primary Commitment to Clients**  
**When social workers who are responsible for program administration, planning, and development consider whether and how to use technology in conjunction with social work programs or services, they shall prioritize the needs of their clients.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social work organizations may find it beneficial to use technology to generate revenue, expand services, or provide services in a more cost-efficient manner. Regardless of the organization's motivation for considering the use of technology, social workers who are responsible for program administration, planning, and development should ensure that the needs and interests of potential and current clients are taken into account. For example, social workers should consider not only whether technology could make service provision more cost-efficient, but also whether the use of technology would foster more effective services for the people intended to be served by the organization.

**Standard 2.18: Confidentiality**  
**Social workers who use technology to facilitate supervision, consultation, or other confidential meetings shall use appropriate safeguards to protect confidentiality.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers who conduct supervision or consultation, and those who facilitate other confidential meetings through the use of technology, should take appropriate precautions to protect the confidentiality of those

communications. Precautions to protect confidentiality depend on the type of technology being used, and may include

- using passwords, firewalls, encryption, and antivirus software
- using electronic service providers that rely on standards of security for data that are transmitted and stored
- ensuring a private setting when using their electronic devices

### **Standard 2.19: Appropriate Boundaries**

**Social workers who work with communities and organizations shall ensure that they maintain appropriate boundaries when they use technology.**

#### **Interpretation**

The types of boundaries that social workers should maintain when doing organizational or community work may be different from those required when providing clinical services to individuals, families, and groups. Because social workers sometimes assume multiple roles and functions in their organizations and communities, they may not be able to avoid all dual or multiple relationships. Still, they should consider how to maintain appropriate boundaries and, in particular, how to avoid significant conflicts of interest.

Boundary issues may be particularly complicated when social workers participate in online discussions hosted on social networks and other forms of electronic communication that are intended to be available to the public. For instance, if a social worker posts political or personal opinions on a blog or social networking site, the worker should be aware that this posting may be seen by people in the organization and community in which the worker is practicing. This does not mean that social workers must avoid all political or personal communication through electronic means. However, social workers should be careful in determining what information or opinions they post, where they post the information or opinions, what language

they use, and who might access the information or opinions they post. Social workers should consider how members of their organizations and communities may react to information that social workers decide to share electronically. Social workers should apply the principles of honesty, respect, and social justice, whether their electronic communications are for personal or work-related purposes.

### **Standard 2.20: Addressing Unique Needs**

**Social workers who help communities and organizations advocate for changes in policies, practices, and programs regarding the use of technology shall ensure that the unique needs of individuals and groups are considered, including factors related to different cultures, ways of learning, abilities, educational levels, and economic circumstances.**

#### **Interpretation**

The use of technology has the potential to improve the economic and social well-being of various individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers who are engaged in policy or program development activities should consider how the use of technology may have differential impacts on people given their unique biopsychosocial circumstances and should share these concerns with appropriate decision makers. For instance, when developing Web sites, social workers should consider how to ensure that the information is accessible to people with visual impairments or other physical challenges. When considering an online social work program for people with depression, anxiety, psychosis, or phobias, social workers should consider whether online or in-person services would be more appropriate. When people are expected to use text-based application forms to access social work services or benefits, social workers should consider options to help people who prefer to use a language other than English and people who are not comfortable with the use of electronic devices.

Social workers who provide electronic services should also be aware of economic challenges, for instance, services that require the use of data plans, computers, tablets, smartphones, or other technology that individuals and groups may not be able to afford. Furthermore, social workers should note that some individuals and groups may not have access to technology at certain times because of religious reasons (for instance, prohibitions from using technology on a Sabbath).

### **Standard 2.21: Access to Technology**

**When appropriate, social workers shall advocate for access to technology and resources for individuals, families, groups, and communities who have difficulty accessing them because they are a member of a vulnerable population such as people with disabilities, limited proficiency in English, limited financial means, lack of familiarity with technology, or other challenges.**

#### **Interpretation**

Access to technology includes access to data plans, electronic devices (such as computers, tablets, or mobile phones), relevant software or apps (through purchase or subscription), and technical support (as needed). Advocating for access to electronic services is part of social workers' commitment to social justice. Access to technology, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, is important for the following reasons:

- Potential clients may not have reasonable access to needed social work services unless they have appropriate access to technology.
- Having access to technology empowers people to participate in democratic and political processes, for instance, expressing their concerns and advocating through online social media, registering to vote, engaging government officials and other policymakers, organizing social action events, tracking legislative and public policy processes, and accessing other information about public policy issues.
- Having access to technology allows access to

online communities and groups that may provide various forms of social support.

Advocating for access to services on a case-by-case basis may not be sufficient, so social workers may consider addressing access issues through community organizing and other forms of advocacy (for example, ensuring that entire neighborhoods, communities, or vulnerable groups have access to certain forms of technology).

Having access to appropriate technology may also be a concern for social workers themselves. Social workers may need to advocate within their organizations and communities to ensure that they have access to technology that is required to perform their jobs effectively.

### **Standard 2.22: Programmatic Needs Assessments and Evaluations**

**Social workers who use technology to conduct needs assessments and program evaluations shall obtain participants' informed consent and provide information about how they will ensure confidentiality.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers use online surveys or other technology to gather information for needs assessments, evaluations, or other research activities. For example, when social workers use technology to conduct needs assessments or evaluations for communities or organizations, they may plan for the information to be shared with government officials, policymakers, program administrators, other decision makers, or the general public. As part of the informed consent process, social workers should ensure that participants are aware of the intended uses of the information gathered, including who will receive the information and what information will be shared. For some purposes, such as legislative advocacy, it may be appropriate for community residents to share personal stories and identifying information, with the participants'

informed consent. For other purposes, it may be appropriate to allow participants to share information on an anonymous basis or to ensure that any identifying information is removed before it is shared with others. Participants should also be apprised of how the results of the needs assessment or program evaluation will be distributed, for instance, through in-person meetings, paper documents, or electronic means.

### **Standard 2.23: Current Knowledge and Competence**

**Social workers practicing with communities, organizations, and in policy positions shall strive to maintain knowledge of current technology, adhere to best practices for its use, and periodically update their knowledge and skills.**

#### **Interpretation**

Technology is constantly evolving, as is its use in various forms of social work practice. Social workers should keep apprised of the types of technology that are available and research best practices, risks, ethical challenges, and ways of managing them. Social workers should also ensure that they know how to use technology in an effective manner so that they perform functions required for work with communities, organizations, and in policy practice.

### **Standard 2.24: Control of Messages**

**Social workers who use technology for community organizing and social advocacy shall be aware that they may have limited or no control over how their electronic messages may be used, shared, revised, or distorted.**

#### **Interpretation**

When social workers post information on blogs, Web sites, and social networking sites, they should be aware that others may use, share, and adapt their messages. For instance, if a social worker posts a written article, photo, or video online, others may edit the posting and share it with others. Postings and other electronic

messages may be misinterpreted, misrepresented, or taken out of context. Although it would be unreasonable to expect social workers to keep track of all uses of their postings, when feasible social workers should try to correct misuses of their postings when such misuses come to their attention.

### **Standard 2.25: Administration**

**Social work administrators shall ensure that they plan and budget for the use of technology in a manner that promotes the organizations' mission and goals in a cost-effective manner.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers may use technology to facilitate various administrative functions, including budgeting, forecasting, planning, meeting, communicating with stakeholders, personnel management, project management, and program evaluation. Although technology can be used to streamline an organization's administrative processes, social work administrators should also be aware of the implications of its use for clients, social workers, and other employees. When making decisions about the appropriate use of technology for administrative purposes, social workers should take the potential benefits and costs of its use into account (for example, how new technology might improve services, how workers and clients might respond to new technology, and the best use of an organization's limited resources).

### **Standard 2.26: Conducting Online Research**

**Social workers who conduct online research shall assess the quality, strengths, and limitations of the research.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers should evaluate the credibility and limitations of research obtained from online sources. This includes taking reasonable steps to assess authorship and sponsorship; the credentials and competencies of the researchers; the reliability,

validity, currency, and limitations of the research; and the accuracy of the reported findings or results.

### **Standard 2.27: Social Media Policies**

**Social work administrators and supervisors shall consider developing social media policies to guide employees and volunteers who work in their organizations.**

#### **Interpretation**

When employees and volunteers post information on social media, that information may have an impact on their organization, whether or not that information was posted for work or personal purposes. By establishing clear social media policies, administrators and supervisors can provide employees and volunteers with guidance on how to maintain professional standards, including protection of client confidentiality, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and the use of accurate and respectful language.

## **Section 3: Gathering, Managing, and Storing Information**

---

Social workers may use various forms of technology to gather, manage, and store client information. *Gathering information* refers to collecting information for the purposes of psychosocial assessments, progress notes, community or organizational needs assessments, program evaluation, research, advocacy, social action, supervision, education, or other social work functions. *Managing information* refers to how information is handled after it has been gathered, for instance, how it is entered into client and other administrative files; how it may be shared with supervisors or others within the social worker's practice setting; how the data is used within a database; how certain information may be shared with colleagues, funders, insurance companies, researchers, or others outside the worker's practice setting; and how social workers



manage information about colleagues. *Storing information* refers to how information is saved and maintained electronically. Using technology in these ways may serve a number of valuable purposes, including accessing information easily, storing information safely, and saving time and money. When social workers use technology to gather, manage, and store information, they must uphold ethical standards related to informed consent, client confidentiality, boundaries, and providing clients access to records.

### **Standard 3.01: Informed Consent**

**As part of the informed consent process, social workers shall explain to clients whether and how they intend to use electronic devices or communication technologies to gather, manage, and store client information.**

#### **Interpretation**

When social workers plan to use technology to gather, manage, and store client information, they should ensure that clients know how the information is being gathered, how it will be used, who will have access to it, how it will be stored, and how it will be retained. They should also explain the potential benefits and risks of using the particular electronic methods for gathering, managing, and storing information.

Often, the primary benefits of gathering, managing, and storing information electronically are convenience and cost. Using technology can save time and money for organizations, social workers, clients, and research and evaluation participants. Other benefits depend on the context of practice.

Risks of gathering, managing, and storing information electronically may include the following:

- Someone intentionally hacks the system and gains access to the data.
- Computers, smartphones, flash drives, external hard drives, or other devices used to gather

- and store the data are stolen or misplaced.
- Information stored electronically may be subpoenaed for use during legal proceedings, just as with paper records.
- Government or law enforcement organizations may try to gain access to information stored electronically.
- Electronic information may be unintentionally sent to the wrong person, especially when sending e-mail or text messages.

The types of precautions to minimize risks will depend on the situation, including the type of electronic devices and programs being used. Social workers should periodically review the types of precautions they use to ensure that they are appropriate given recent changes and identified risks in the use of technology (that is, new forms of viruses, cyberattacks, or other potential problems).

### **Standard 3.02: Separation of Personal and Professional Communications**

**When social workers gather, manage, and store client information electronically, they shall ensure clear delineation between personal and professional communications and information.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers should clearly delineate between personal and professional information when using personal technology to gather, manage, and store information about clients. This is important to maintain ethical boundaries with clients, maintain proper client files, and possibly protect the social worker's personal or other files from disclosure. When feasible, social workers should consider using their professional or organization's electronic devices to gather, manage, and store information. If this is not feasible, then other means should be implemented, for example, the use of separate accounts, separate storage media or folders, et cetera. Social workers should note that clients generally have a right to access their records; thus any blurring of

personal versus professional communication and data storage, for example, through the use of social workers' personal devices, might risk the privacy of the social worker's personal information.

### **Standard 3.03: Handling Confidential Information**

**Social workers shall take reasonable steps to ensure that confidential information concerning clients or research participants is gathered, managed, and stored in a secure manner and in accordance with relevant federal and state statutes, regulations, and organizational policies.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers who gather, manage, and store information electronically should take reasonable steps to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of information pertaining to clients or research participants. Federal and state statutes and regulations may dictate how electronic records are to be stored and social workers are responsible for being aware of and adhering to them.

Organizations in various practice settings may have additional policies regarding the storage of electronic communications.

Electronic information should be stored in secure locations. Access should be limited to appropriate parties. When electronic files are backed up, reasonable precautions should also be taken to maintain confidentiality of the backed-up files.

Social workers should have policies that incorporate risk management strategies. For example, depending on the practice context, social workers can use a closed server, whereby access to information is limited to people within the organization and is not accessible through the Internet. Also, if identifying information is not needed, social workers can gather data on an anonymous basis so a particular client or research participant cannot be linked with the information. Social workers should ensure that their means of electronic data gathering are in keeping with

ethical standards and best practice guidelines. Social workers should adhere to the privacy and security standards of applicable laws such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) (P.L. 104-191), the federal policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR Part 46), federal regulations for the protection of alcohol and drug abuse patient records (42 CFR Part 2), federal regulations for the protection of students' education records under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-380, § 513), section 215 of the USA Patriot Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-56), and other relevant federal and state laws. These laws may address electronic transactions, client and research participant rights, and allowable disclosure. They may also include requirements regarding data protection. It may be helpful for social workers to consult information technology specialists to ensure that electronically stored information is gathered, stored, and disposed in a safe manner that meets federal and state laws that protect the privacy and confidentiality of the client or research participant.

Social workers should be aware that some free services for gathering, managing, and storing data may not be as secure as fee-for-service options. For instance, when collecting data on some free survey services, the Internet Protocol addresses of survey respondents may be identifiable. If clients or research participants are using an online social network program to log on to the survey, their participation in the survey might be disclosed on their social networking site.

Cloud storage has become technically appropriate and increasingly popular. Social workers who use cloud storage should adhere to privacy and security standards in compliance with HIPAA regulations and other relevant federal and state laws.

### **Standard 3.04: Access to Records within an Organization**

**Social workers shall take reasonable steps to develop and implement policies regarding which personnel have access to clients' electronic records, keeping in mind the value of limiting access to those colleagues who truly require it, to respect client privacy.**

#### **Interpretation**

When information is stored electronically, it may be easy for various personnel within an organization to access that information. Social workers should protect client confidentiality by developing and implementing policies that restrict access to colleagues who truly have a need for that access. For personnel who need access to client information for research and evaluation purposes, data could be made available anonymously. As part of the informed consent process, social workers should inform clients about which personnel in the workplace may have access to information in their records.

Social workers should take special safeguards to ensure that clients' electronic records are stored in an accessible manner. Social workers should ensure that electronic records continue to be retrievable when they update their software and technology, at least for any statutory record retention period. Social workers should establish protocols to ensure that appropriate colleagues can get access to secure electronic records in the event of a social worker's sudden incapacity or death.

### **Standard 3.05: Breach of Confidentiality**

**Social workers shall develop and disclose policies and procedures concerning how they would notify clients of any breach of their confidential records.**

#### **Interpretation**

Regardless of the precautions that social workers take to ensure that client records are gathered, managed, and stored in a secure manner,

confidential electronic records may be breached. Social workers should comply with ethical standards and relevant federal and state laws regarding any duty to inform clients about possible breaches of confidentiality. Social workers should also develop policies and procedures detailing how they would inform clients regarding breaches of confidentiality.

### **Standard 3.06: Credibility of Information Gathered Electronically**

**When social workers use technology to gather information for social work practice or research, they shall gather information in a manner that reasonably ensures its reliability and accuracy.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers may use online forms, Web sites, or other electronic means to collect data. To maintain the credibility of the information collected, social workers should establish and verify the identity of the client, research participant, or other person who is submitting the information. For instance, when collecting data from research participants or when asking a client to submit information online (for example, for an intake assessment), the worker could provide the client with a unique identifier or passcode.

### **Standard 3.07: Sharing Information with Other Parties**

**Social workers who share confidential client information with other parties electronically shall take reasonable steps to protect the confidentiality of the information.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers may at times share sensitive information electronically with professional colleagues within their workplace or with other organizations. Before sharing information outside the organization, social workers should ensure that they have informed consent from the client. When sharing information electronically,

social workers should ensure that they are sending information to the accurate e-mail address, Web site, or other electronic location. Because of the ease with which information shared electronically can go astray (for example, with a mistake of just one digit or letter in an electronic address), social workers should double-check their addresses before sending information electronically.

When sending information electronically, social workers should advise recipients that the information is confidential and should not be shared with others without the explicit consent of the client, and when appropriate with the consent of the social worker who prepared the records.

Methods to manage risks when sharing client records electronically may include

- ensuring that the social worker has the correct e-mail address, fax machine or telephone number, or other electronic destination
- using secure servers and encrypted information
- limiting the information sent to what is required (for example, if it is not necessary to include information that identifies the client or information that is particularly sensitive, then this information should be redacted)
- ensuring that the recipient of the information will respect the social worker's request to maintain confidentiality and not share the information with others without the explicit consent of the client

**Standard 3.08: Client Access to Own Records**  
Social workers shall ensure that client access to electronic records is provided in a manner that takes client confidentiality, privacy, and the client's best interests into account.

### **Interpretation**

Social workers recognize that clients generally have a right to access their own records. When records are created or available in electronic form, access may be facilitated electronically.

Electronic access can be less expensive. It can also be more convenient and timelier than having the client come to the office to pick up paper copies or having to mail paper copies. Despite the convenience, when records can be accessed electronically there may be risks to client confidentiality and the client's best interests. Examples include the following:

- Electronic information systems could be hacked or electronic communication devices may be lost or stolen.
- If the client experiences abuse or exploitation from a partner or other family member, it may be particularly important to ensure that the family member in question does not have access to the client's records.
- If a client is suicidal or otherwise vulnerable, having immediate access to certain information electronically may not be in the client's best interests.

In some practice settings, clients have accounts that provide them with immediate access to their records and other information posted by social workers or other organizations. In some practice settings, it may not be appropriate for clients to have access to raw data without having the opportunity to consult with a social worker or other professional to help interpret the information and to provide supportive counseling as needed. For example, if a client completes an online psychosocial instrument, the client might misinterpret the results or may react to troubling findings. Social workers should develop and implement policies to manage risks while ensuring adherence to client's legal right of access.

### **Standard 3.09: Using Search Engines to Locate Information about Clients**

**Except for compelling professional reasons, social workers shall not gather information about clients from online sources without the client's consent; if they do so, they shall take reasonable steps to verify the accuracy of the found information.**



## **Interpretation**

Social workers gather information from a variety of sources to perform their assessments, including from family, schools, other professionals, and clients themselves. Client information discovered on the Internet using search engines is different from information that clients share directly with the social worker. Before social workers gather information from the Internet or other electronic sources, they should obtain the client's informed consent. Intentionally gathering information about a client through electronic means without consent should only be done if there is an emergency situation or specific reason that the information cannot or should not be obtained from the client directly or from third parties designated by the client.

Social workers should respect the privacy of client information posted on online social networks or other electronic media and not communicate with clients through these formats or gather information about clients through them without the client's knowledge and consent. If a social worker unintentionally comes across information about a client through electronic forms of communication, the social worker should avoid reading or gathering further information from this source once the identity of the client becomes evident. If information about a client is unintentionally accessed through electronic means (for instance on a social networking site belonging to another person), the social worker should make this known to the client and discuss the implications of the social worker having this knowledge.

Exceptions to seeking client consent to gather information online may arise in emergency situations, for instance, when the client poses a serious, imminent risk to self or others, and the only way to identify where the client is would be to search for information online. Even in such cases, social workers should consider whether it is appropriate for them to search for client

information online, or whether it would be more appropriate for police, emergency response teams, or other protective services professionals to do so. Social workers who search online for information about clients for compelling professional reasons should include proper documentation in the client's record.

It is important to verify online information gathered about a client. This may be done by contacting the original source of the information, checking the accuracy of the information with the client, or checking the accuracy of the information with other appropriate sources.

### **Standard 3.10: Using Search Engines to Locate Information about Professional Colleagues**

**When gathering online information about professional colleagues, social workers shall respect colleagues and verify the accuracy of the information before using it.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers may need to gather information about professional colleagues for a variety of reasons, for instance to

- find contact information to facilitate client referrals
- determine client eligibility for services
- determine the credentials and experience of colleagues
- identify policies and practices of the colleague
- gather information in relation to a potential complaint or lawsuit concerning the colleague

When searching for information about a colleague online, social workers should take reasonable steps to verify the accuracy of the information before relying on it. To verify information, it may be appropriate to contact the original source of the information that is posted or speak directly with the professional colleague. It may also be appropriate to confirm the accuracy of the information by checking other sources.

Social workers should also pay attention to who is posting and monitoring information on the Internet. For instance, if information about a colleague comes from a professional association or regulatory body that is responsible for reviewing professional conduct, the information would likely be more reliable than information coming from an anonymous source with no system for accountability or checks for accuracy. Social workers should be aware of the laws and regulations in their state about mandated reporting of colleagues if a social worker discovers online information about a colleague that violates the social work scope of practice or ethical standards. In such a situation, the social worker may have a legal obligation to report the colleague.

Social workers should avoid using technology to pry into the personal lives of professional colleagues (for example, searching for information that is not pertinent to the work they are doing). Social workers should respect the privacy of professional colleagues in relation to personal activities and electronically accessible information that is not relevant to their professional services.

**Standard 3.11: Treating Colleagues with Respect**  
**Social workers who communicate using electronic tools shall treat colleagues with respect and shall represent accurately and fairly the qualifications, views, and obligations of colleagues.**

### **Interpretation**

Social workers should adhere to strict ethical standards when they communicate with and about colleagues using electronic tools, draw on colleagues' professional work, and review electronic information posted by colleagues. Social workers should

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

- avoid disclosing 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
- take reasonable steps to correct or remove any inaccurate or offensive information they have posted or transmitted about a colleague using technology
- acknowledge the work of and the contributions made by others and avoid using technology to present the work of others as their own
- take appropriate action if they believe that a colleague who provides electronic social work services is behaving unethically, is not using appropriate safeguards, or is allowing unauthorized access to 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 should report through appropriate formal channels established by employers, professional organizations, and governmental regulatory bodies
- use professional judgment and take steps to discourage, prevent, expose, and correct any efforts by colleagues who knowingly produce, possess, download, or transmit illicit or illegal content or images in electronic format

### **Standard 3.12: Open Access Information**

**When information is posted or stored electronically in a manner that is intended to be available to certain groups or to the public in general, social workers shall be aware of how that information may be used and interpreted, and take reasonable steps to ensure that the information is accurate, respectful, and complete.**

#### **Interpretation**

For information falling under open access to information laws for government entities, social workers may need to ensure that the data can be

accessed by the public. Social workers should be aware of the digital footprint created by such postings, including the breadth of access and the period of time during which the information may be available (perhaps to all people, and forever). Given the broad and open access to electronic information, social workers should be aware of the potential uses and misuses of this material, and the potential for misunderstandings when people attempt to communicate humor, sarcasm, or emotionally charged opinions.

**Standard 3.13: Accessing Client Records Remotely**  
**Social workers shall develop and follow appropriate policies regarding whether and how they can access electronic client records remotely.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers may have or desire remote access to electronic client records when they are away from their organization or usual place of practice. They should be aware that accessing records from remote locations may pose risks to client privacy and confidentiality. The use of unencrypted e-mail servers by a social worker to communicate with clients increases the risk of privacy violations and should be avoided. Confidentiality risks may increase if a social worker accesses work-related e-mail, text messages, voice mail, or other electronic messages from a nonwork computer, smartphone, or other personal electronic device.

**Standard 3.14: Managing Phased Out and Outdated Electronic Devices**  
**When an electronic device is no longer needed, is phased out, or is outdated, social workers shall take steps to protect their clients, employer, themselves, and the environment.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social workers should recognize that technology changes and various forms of software, hardware, devices, and information storage tools may become obsolete. When disposing of obsolete electronic devices, social workers should take

steps to prevent data leaks and unauthorized access to confidential information. Determining the appropriate safeguards may require consultation with information technology experts. When social workers dispose of electronic devices, they should follow current environmental protection guidelines and relevant statutes and regulations in their jurisdictions related to record retention and disposal of records and electronics.

## Section 4: Social Work Education and Supervision

---

This section provides guidance on the use of technology to social workers who are involved in the design and delivery of education and supervision. Technology advances have greatly expanded opportunities for social workers to deliver education, training, and supervision in a variety of formats. Technology is used to deliver social work courses and training and is a widely used, evolving part of social work education. The use of technology in social work education and training can enhance access, skill development, student engagement, and learning outcomes. Social work education includes undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs, field instruction, supervision, continuing education, and organization-based education. Social workers who use technology in social work education must adhere to standards related to online and distance learning and education. Social workers who use technology for education, training, and supervision also ensure that students and supervisees are familiar with prevailing practice, regulation, accreditation, and ethical standards pertaining to the use of technology.

## Standard 4.01: Use of Technology in Social Work Education

**Social workers who use technology to design and deliver education and training shall develop competence in the ethical use of the technology in a manner appropriate for the particular context.**

### Interpretation

Social workers who use technology for instructional purposes should be familiar with technology-mediated tools that provide social work education in the classroom, field, and within workplace settings. Technology tools and instruction can be used to deliver education in traditional, online, or hybrid formats. When appropriate, social workers who use technology for educational purposes should ensure that students and trainees achieve the learning competencies and objectives of the educational programs as required by accreditation and regulatory bodies.

Social workers should examine the extent to which education provided using technology enables students to master core and essential professional skills. Social workers who develop, design, and deliver education and training programs using technology should

- engage in appropriate education, study, training, consultation, and supervision with professionals who are competent in the use of technology-mediated tools for educational purposes
- keep current with emerging knowledge related to the delivery of technology-mediated education
- consider pedagogical theory and research on the use of technology, to make decisions about whether and how to use technology for educational purposes
- create learning experiences to enable student success and develop social work competencies
- use student-centered instructional strategies that are connected to real-world practice applications to engage students in learning,

such as peer-based learning, inquiry-based activities, collaborative learning, discussion groups, self-directed learning, case studies, small group work, and guided design

- incorporate technology-based adaptive devices in the curriculum to ensure delivery of accessible services
- address cultural competency issues affecting the use of technology in practice, such as students' familiarity and comfort with technology; access to the Internet; language translation software; and the use of technology to meet the needs of diverse populations, such as people with differing physical abilities
- use a range of existing and emerging technologies that effectively support student learning and engagement in the online environment
- facilitate and monitor appropriate interaction among students
- promote student success by providing clear expectations, prompt responses, and regular feedback
- model, guide, and encourage legal, ethical, and safe behavior related to technology use
- assess students considering varying learning styles, literacy levels, disabilities, access to technology, and needs for accommodations (including possible use of adaptive and assistive technologies)
- ensure that students are competent to use the proposed technology in an effective and ethical manner
- take appropriate steps to protect the confidentiality of personal student information in accordance with relevant laws and ethical standards

#### **Standard 4.02: Training Social Workers about the Use of Technology in Practice**

**Social workers who provide education to students and practitioners concerning the use of technology in social work practice shall provide them with knowledge about the ethical use of technology, including potential benefits and risks.**



## Interpretation

Social workers who teach students and practitioners about ways to use technology in social work practice should be knowledgeable about effective and ethical use of technology. When appropriate and applicable, social work educators should ensure that this information is included in classroom instruction and supervision.

Social workers who teach about the use of technology should address ways to adhere to best practices in social work, including whether and when technology is an appropriate way to provide services, evidence of effectiveness, assessment and outcome measures, and ways to accommodate individual learning needs and cultural diversity. Social work educators, practitioners, and students should develop protocols to evaluate client outcomes to expand knowledge that promotes ethical, effective, and safe use of technology in social work practice.

Social work educators should teach students to think critically about the potential benefits and risks of using technology in social work practice. Key topics include the implications of technology for

- establishing and maintaining meaningful and effective relationships with clients and others
- maintaining confidentiality
- developing risk management strategies in response to crisis situations
- developing a social media policy
- using the latest technology software and apps in assignments and other learning activities to develop skills for client assessment, intervention planning, service delivery, monitoring, and evaluation
- developing ways to monitor and assess client progress and outcomes
- complying with relevant ethical and legal standards in social work (especially related to informed consent, confidentiality, maintaining appropriate boundaries, termination of services, and documentation)

### **Standard 4.03: Continuing Education**

**Social work educators who use technology in their teaching and instruct students on the use of technology in social work practice shall examine and keep current with relevant emerging knowledge.**

#### **Interpretation**

Social work educators should keep current with developments related to the use of technology to teach, supervise, and practice social work. Social workers should review relevant professional literature and attend relevant continuing education classes, seminars, workshops, webinars, and other in-person and online courses and workshops. When examining research evidence, social workers should give precedence to research that meets prevailing professional methodological and ethical standards.

### **Standard 4.04: Social Media Policies**

**When using online social media for educational purposes, social work educators shall provide students with social media policies to provide them with guidance about ethical considerations.**

#### **Interpretation**

When using social media for educational purposes, it is important for students to understand how to use social media in a professional manner. The type of language, personal disclosures, and ways of communicating that students use for personal purposes may not be appropriate for the classroom or professional social work purposes. Social work educators should inform students about organizational policies and relevant standards related to confidentiality, demonstrating respect, academic integrity, copyright and plagiarism, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and upholding other social work ethical standards.

#### **Standard 4.05: Evaluation**

**When evaluating students on their use of technology in social work practice, social work educators shall provide clear guidance on professional expectations and how online tests, discussions, or other assignments will be graded.**

##### **Interpretation**

For some online assignments and tests, grading may be similar to grading for traditional assignments. However, students may not be familiar with the criteria for grading for certain types of assignments using various forms of technology. For instance, if students are expected to participate in online discussions, to post information or opinions on social media, or to use PowerPoint software to develop group presentations, they should be informed of the specific criteria that will be used to evaluate their performance.

#### **Standard 4.06: Technological Disruptions**

**Social work educators shall provide students with information about how to manage technological problems that may be caused by loss of power, viruses, hardware failures, lost or stolen devices, or other issues that may disrupt the educational process.**

##### **Interpretation**

Social work educators should prepare themselves and their students for the possibility of technological disruptions. For instance, if there is a technological failure during a class taught using live video, students may be instructed to use a teleconference as a backup or to participate in a rescheduled class. If students are supposed to complete an online test or assignment, but the technology is not permitting them to do so by the due date, students should know how to advise the professor or technology assistants about the problems.

#### **Standard 4.07: Distance Education**

**When teaching social work practitioners or students in remote locations, social work educators shall ensure that they have sufficient understanding of the cultural, social, and legal contexts of the other locations where the practitioners or students are located.**

##### **Interpretation**

Technology enables educators to teach students and social workers in different communities, states, and countries. Social workers should ensure that they have the knowledge, skills, and awareness to provide education that is culturally appropriate for the locations where students and social workers are learning and working. Social work educators should be knowledgeable about the cultures of the students and the clients whom the students may be serving. To enhance cultural competence, educators may consult with locally trained social workers when developing their curricula to better address local challenges with culturally appropriate interventions.

#### **Standard 4.08: Support**

**Social work educators who use technology shall ensure that students have sufficient access to technological support to assist with technological questions or problems that may arise during the educational process.**

##### **Interpretation**

When students and social workers use technology for educational purposes, they may experience challenges, particularly when they are first learning to use the technology and in situations where the technology fails to work. Educators should provide students with information on how to access help to preempt and resolve problems with technology.

### **Standard 4.09: Maintenance of Academic Standards**

**When social work educators use technology to facilitate assignments or tests, they shall take appropriate measures to promote academic standards related to honesty, integrity, freedom of expression, and respect for the dignity and worth of all people.**

#### **Interpretation**

When using technology, educators may face unique challenges ensuring that students maintain appropriate academic integrity. For instance, when students submit assignments or tests online, educators should take precautions to ensure that assignments or tests are submitted by the students themselves, they submit original work, and they have not been assisted by others (unless working with others is part of the assignment). When facilitating online discussions among students, educators should provide students with guidance on how to communicate in a professional manner, including how to maintain appropriate professional boundaries and how to use respectful language.

### **Standard 4.10: Educator–Student Boundaries**

**Social work educators who use technology shall take precautions to ensure maintenance of appropriate educator–student boundaries.**

#### **Interpretation**

When using technology to communicate with students, some social work educators use personal devices or accounts. This may facilitate more timely and convenient communication. Also, the educational institution or setting may not provide educators with devices or sufficient technology.

To maintain appropriate boundaries with students, social work educators should

- determine whether the policies of the educational institution or setting permit the use of personal devices or accounts
- determine whether it is ethical and appropriate to use personal technological devices and

- accounts for professional educational purposes
- assess and manage the risk of educators using personal mobile devices, which includes maintaining confidential student records on the device, the risk of losing the device or the device being stolen, downloading a virus or malware, shared use of the device with family or friends, and the use of unsecured Wi-Fi networks
  - provide clear policies on appropriate methods, expectations, and times for using technology to communicate with educators and field supervisors
  - model appropriate professional boundaries in all online communications with students
  - educate students about the risks of online dual relationships

#### **Standard 4.11: Field Instruction**

**Social workers who provide field instruction to students shall address the use of technology in organizational settings.**

#### **Interpretation**

When appropriate, field instructors should discuss with students

- the ways in which technology is used in organizational settings
- the importance of protocols to ensure access to secure electronic records in the event of a social worker's field placement termination, incapacity, or death
- similarities and differences between the school's and organization's social media policies
- appropriate use of personal and professional social media considering its potential impact on clients, students, colleagues, employers, and the social work profession
- ways to comply with relevant laws, regulations, ethical standards, and organizational policies to ensure protection of confidential information

## Standard 4.12: Social Work Supervision

**Social workers who use technology to provide supervision shall ensure that they are able to assess students' and supervisees' learning and professional competence.**

### Interpretation

Some social workers use technology to provide supervision in a timely and convenient manner. When using technology to provide supervision, social workers should ensure that they are able to assess sufficiently students' and supervisees' learning and professional competence and provide appropriate feedback. Social workers should comply with guidelines concerning provision of remote supervision adopted by the jurisdictions in which the supervisors and supervisees are regulated. Social workers who provide remote supervision should comply with relevant standards in the *NASW Code of Ethics*, relevant technology standards, applicable licensing laws and regulations, and organization policies and procedures.

## Glossary

---

This glossary contains definitions of key terms used in this document that are relevant to these practice standards, including terms related to the use of electronic technology in various areas of social work practice.

### App

An application or software that is downloaded onto mobile devices to perform a specific function.

### Boundary Confusion

Failure to recognize the psychological distinctiveness of individuals or confusion of interpersonal roles.

### Client

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

## **Clinical Social Work**

The professional applications of social work theory and methods to the treatment and prevention of psychosocial dysfunction, disability, or impairment, including emotional and mental disorders.

## **Cloud**

A remote platform for storing and accessing software (applications) and data through the Internet rather than through a direct connection to a local server or personal computer.

## **Confidentiality**

A principle of ethics according to which the social worker may not disclose information about a client without the client's consent. This information includes the identity of the client, content of communications, professional opinions about the client, and material from records.

## **Digital Footprint**

Trails or traces of data that may be stored without the original user's knowledge or consent (for example, Internet protocol addresses, cookies, browsing history, metadata, and other information that may or may not include identifying data about the user). Also referred to as digital shadow or cyber shadow.

## **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 at a later time.

## **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).

## **Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA)**

A set of federal standards that protect electronic health information through the implementation of privacy and security rules and the establishment of electronic transactions and code sets.

## **Malware**

Malicious software (electronic program) that is designed to destroy data or harm the functioning of computers or other electronic devices. Examples include trojans, viruses, and worms.

## **Netiquette**

Norms or behavioral guidelines concerning appropriate or acceptable ways to engage in communication using the Internet, online social networking, e-mail, chatrooms, or other forms of electronic communication (for example, what type of information may be shared or posted, how often and when it should be posted, what type of language is acceptable, who may post or share information, who may have access to the information). Some forms of communication that may be deemed inappropriate include *spamming* (sending large numbers of messages that recipients may view as junk) and *flaming* (publicly criticizing someone for the purpose of embarrassing the person).

## **Online Social Networking**

Use of electronic programs that allow individuals, groups, organizations, and communities to connect with each other and share information. The information may be in the form of electronic messages, photographs, artwork, videos, audio recordings, or other forms of communication.

**Pedagogical Theory**

The study of the theory and practice of education.

**Practice Setting**

The organizational context in which a social worker practices (for example, independent practice, publicly funded agency, nonprofit agency, for-profit agency, school, hospital, nursing home, hospice program, residential program, military base, prison, community organization, or government agency).

**Practice Standards**

Benchmarks that describe the services that social workers should provide, that employers should support, and that consumers should expect. Practice standards reflect current and emerging best practice trends and are a critical component of the professional social worker's toolkit.

**Risk Management**

The practice of ethical, competent social work services and accurate documentation of practice decisions and interventions to protect clients and prevent litigation and ethics complaints.

**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, and encryption).

**Social Media**

Computer-mediated technologies that allow for the sharing of information, ideas, and other forms of communication through virtual communities and networks.

**Social Work Education**

The formal training and subsequent experience that prepare social workers for their professional roles. The formal training takes place primarily in accredited colleges and universities and includes

undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs, field instruction, supervision, continuing education, and organization-based education.

### **Substantial Equivalency**

Demonstration that a state's licensure is comparable to that of other jurisdictions.

### **Technology**

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

## **Resources**

---

American Counseling Association. (2014). *ACA code of ethics*. Retrieved from [www.counseling.org/docs/ethics/2014-aca-code-of-ethics.pdf?sfvrsn=4](http://www.counseling.org/docs/ethics/2014-aca-code-of-ethics.pdf?sfvrsn=4)

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct*. Retrieved from [www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx](http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx)

American Telemedicine Association. (2013, May). *Practice guidelines for video-based online mental health services*. Retrieved from [www.americantelemed.org/docs/default-source/standards/practice-guidelines-for-video-based-online-mental-health-services.pdf?sfvrsn=6](http://www.americantelemed.org/docs/default-source/standards/practice-guidelines-for-video-based-online-mental-health-services.pdf?sfvrsn=6)

Association of Social Work Boards. (2015). *Model regulatory standards for technology and social work practice: ASWB International Technology Task Force, 2013–214*. Retrieved from [www.aswb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ASWB-Model-Regulatory-Standards-for-Technology-and-Social-Work-Practice.pdf](http://www.aswb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ASWB-Model-Regulatory-Standards-for-Technology-and-Social-Work-Practice.pdf)

Barak, A., & Grohol, J. M. (2011). Current and future trends in Internet-supported mental health interventions. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 29, 155–196.

Barak, A., Hen, L., Boniel-Nissim, M., & Shapira, N. (2008). A comprehensive review and a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of Internet-based psychotherapeutic interventions. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 26, 109–160.

Barsky, A. E. (2017). Social work practice and technology: Ethical issues and policy responses. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 35, 1–12.

Dowling, M., & Rickwood, D. (2013). Online counseling and therapy for mental health problems: A systematic review of individual synchronous interventions using chat. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 31, 1–21.

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, P.L. 93-380, § 513, 34 CFR 99 (August 21, 1974). Retrieved from [www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/pdf/ferparegs.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/pdf/ferparegs.pdf)

Federation of State Medical Boards. (2014). *Model policy for the appropriate use of telemedicine technologies in the practice of medicine*. Retrieved from [www.fsmb.org/Media/Default/PDF/FSMB/Advocacy/FSMB\\_Telemedicine\\_Policy.pdf](http://www.fsmb.org/Media/Default/PDF/FSMB/Advocacy/FSMB_Telemedicine_Policy.pdf)

Finn, J., & Barak, A. (2010). A descriptive study of e-counsellor attitudes, ethics, and practice. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Review*, 24(2), 268–277.

Fitch, D. (2015). A conceptual framework for information technology in social work practice. *Advances in Social Work*, 16, 15–30.

Gupta, A., & Agrawal, A. (2012). Internet counselling and psychological services. *Social Science International*, 28, 105–122.

Gutheil, T. G., & Simon, R. (2005). E-mails, extra-therapeutic contact, and early boundary problems: The Internet as a “slippery slope.” *Psychiatric Annals*, 35, 952–960.

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, P.L. 104-191, 100 Stat. 2548 (August 21, 1996). Retrieved from [www.cms.gov/Regulations-and-Guidance/HIPAA-Administrative-Simplification/HIPAA-GenInfo/downloads/hipaalaw.pdf](http://www.cms.gov/Regulations-and-Guidance/HIPAA-Administrative-Simplification/HIPAA-GenInfo/downloads/hipaalaw.pdf)

Kolmes, K. (2014, April 26). *My private practice social media policy*. Retrieved from [www.drkkolmes.com/docs/socmed.pdf](http://www.drkkolmes.com/docs/socmed.pdf)

Lamendola, W. (2010). Social work and social presence in an online world. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 28, 108–119.

Midkiff, D. M., & Wyatt, W. J. (2008). Ethical issues in the provision of online mental health services (etherapy). *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 26, 310–332.

National Association of Social Workers. (2015). *Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Retrieved from [www.naswdc.org/pubs/code/code.asp](http://www.naswdc.org/pubs/code/code.asp)

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers. (2012). *Standards for technology use in social work practice*. Retrieved from [www.nlasw.ca/pdf/Standards\\_For\\_Technology\\_Use\\_In\\_Social\\_Work\\_Practice.pdf](http://www.nlasw.ca/pdf/Standards_For_Technology_Use_In_Social_Work_Practice.pdf)

Online Therapy Institute. (2014). *Ethical framework for use of technology in mental health*. Retrieved from <http://onlinetherapyinstitute.com/ethical-training/>

Reamer, F. G. (2013). Social work in a digital age: Ethical and risk management challenges. *Social Work*, 58, 163–172.

Reamer, F. G. (2015). Digital technology in social work. In C. Franklin (Ed.-in-Chief), *Encyclopedia of social work online*. New York and Washington, DC: Oxford University Press and NASW Press. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.1160

Richards, D., & Vigano, N. (2013). Online counseling: A narrative and critical review of the literature. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69, 994–1011.

Schoech, R. (2014). Human services technology, 1980+: Retrospective and perspective. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 32, 240–253.

Singer, J. B., & Sage, M. (2015). Technology and social work practice: Micro, mezzo, and macro applications. In K. Corcoran & A. R. Roberts (Eds.), *Social workers' desk reference* (3rd ed., pp. 179–188). New York: Oxford University Press.





NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
OF SOCIAL WORKERS

750 First Street, NE

Suite 800

Washington, DC 20002-4241

202.408.8600

**[socialworkers.org](https://socialworkers.org)**