

CODE OF ETHICS FOR SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALS

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1. Introduction

Different countries' legal systems are very different in terms of their complexity and content today. Professional workers in the field of social work must be able to make decisions in their existing legal space that are based on general human values, commonly referred to as ethics. Irrespective of some contradictory legal issues, social work professionals should not ignore cases where help is required. Situations may occur where social work professionals are vulnerable and may, due to their own apprehension, choose not to intervene in conflicts, thus damaging both the content and reputation of social work.

All this being considered, the committee of ethics of the Estonian Association of Social Work engaged in creating a code of ethics for social work professionals which complements legal acts and gives support to social work professionals in their hard but necessary work.

The purpose of the code of ethics for social work professionals is to provide support to workers in the field of social work in their daily jobs.

Where situations have not been regulated by legislation or this document, the interests of the weakest party must be considered paramount.

This code of ethics is a set of views which is in constant development and is revised at least every four years.

2. Concepts

Social work – professional activities to enforce the principles of social justice, to improve quality of life, to develop social capital, and to prevent, alleviate or remove difficulties in surviving. Social work is by its nature preventive, alleviating, rehabilitative, guiding, caring or developing.

Social work professional – any person who works in the social welfare system, including personal care workers, social workers, managers of social welfare institutions, the Minister of Social Affairs, voluntary workers and other people.

Client – an individual, a household, a group or a community who requires help in order to cope autonomously.

Institution – a social welfare unit which plans, manages, provides, coordinates or supervises social services.

3. Source documents in social work

International declarations and conventions of human rights form the ethical basis which is accepted worldwide:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The European Social Charter, revised and amended

The following source documents regulate social work in Estonia:

- The Constitution
- The Social Welfare Act
- The Child Protection Act
- The Family Law Act
- The Professions Act

4. General principles of ethical conduct of social work professionals

1. Social work professionals serve the interests of society, justify their clients' trust, and enhance and maintain the reputation of their profession.
2. Social work professionals support the intrinsic values of individuals, and their right to welfare and dignity.
3. Social work professionals pursue and promote the principles of social justice in relationships with society as well as with other people whom they work alongside or for.
4. Social work professionals oppose any form of discrimination, and work for the benefit of people irrespective of their capabilities, age, culture, gender, marital status, socio-economic status, political views, sexual orientation, beliefs, race or other physical features.
5. Social work professionals acknowledge and respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of their service area, and take into consideration personal, family, group and community differences.
6. Social work professionals are careful and take responsibility for distributing the resources allocated to them in a manner which is sustainable, fair and appropriate for meeting needs.
7. Social work professionals are obliged to draw the attention of the general public, interest groups, lawmakers and employers to situations where people live in poverty, or where allocation of resources is degrading or unfair, or damaging to individuals', households' or communities' capacity for autonomy.
8. Social work professionals make sure that both the general public and employers are aware of the contents of this document and its expected impact on the activities of workers in the field of social work.
9. Social work professionals may initiate professional ethical discussions in order to seek solutions to problems.

5. The ethical conduct of social work professionals in customer service

1. The conduct of social work professionals is based on a humane approach to people.
2. The tools of social work professionals are their knowledge, skills, experience and professional ethics.
3. Social work professionals have a belief in their clients' ability to take decisions concerning their own lives; provide delicate guidance for informed decisions; and acknowledge and respect their clients' personal goals, responsibilities and civic rights within the limits of their capacity and competence.
4. Social work professionals know the limits of their competence when working with clients, i.e. they do not make promises they cannot keep.
5. If there is an insoluble conflict of values and/or roles, social work professionals refer their clients to such other equal colleagues as will accept the reference, and they notify their employers of having done so.
6. Social work professionals respect the welfare of a client/group of clients and themselves; that is to say they:
 - a) acknowledge the client's or partner's right to privacy and confidentiality;
 - b) support and maintain the client's right to trust;
 - c) use information at their disposal in a responsible manner according to the internal procedures of the institution or an agreement with the client;
 - d) know their rights and use them in an ethical manner.
7. Social work professionals follow the customer service standards of their institution, and they take responsibility for carrying out the objectives of the organisation and make proposals to amend them when necessary.
8. Social work professionals provide information to their clients in a comprehensible manner.

6. The ethical conduct of social work professionals towards their colleagues and partners

1. Social work professionals respect the opinions of their colleagues and partners, and praise or criticise in a responsible manner through the relevant channels.
2. Social work professionals impart and share experience, knowledge and information to their colleagues and partners.
3. Social work professionals are always ready to listen to colleagues or partners, advise and empower them.
4. Social work professionals protect their colleagues and partners against unfair treatment or criticism.
5. Social work professionals take a case over from a colleague who has encountered a conflict of roles.

7. The ethical conduct of social work professionals in respect of their profession

1. Social work professionals respect and protect the profession of social work, value their job and defend it against unjustified criticisms.
2. Social work professionals follow and promote the ethical standards of their profession, take part in debates on ethical issues, and take responsibility for the personal ethical decisions and choices made in their work.
3. Social work professionals explain and publicise the starting points, principles and professional practices of social work in order to facilitate open discussions, and make assessments and provide feedback to decision-makers.
4. Social work professionals develop their professional skills, and are open to innovative approaches to and methods of social work which are based on the research and analysis of practical casework.
5. Social work professionals maintain and develop the knowledge and skills required in social work and thus safeguard their competence, professional development and performance.
6. Social work professionals act in an honest manner, have clear limits between their personal life, professional life and public activities, do not use their position for personal welfare gain or to political advantage.
7. Social work professionals collect and disseminate information suggesting social problems.
8. Social work professionals consistently and critically evaluate the values and ethical principles of social work so that they meet changes in society.

8. Management procedures for ethical conflicts

1. Social work professionals are attentive, they notice mistakes concerning the rules of the code of ethics and respond to them, and protect the reputation of social work and partners.
2. The committee of ethics of the Estonian Association of Social Work (ESTA) can be informed of any breach of the rules the code of ethics.
3. The committee of ethics makes enquiries concerning an ethical conflict and forms their opinion using the responses, and communicates the opinion to the parties involved.
4. If a social work professional has grossly breached the rules of the code of ethics and such behaviour has damaged the reputation of social work, the committee of ethics may start a public discussion (including in the journal Sotsiaaltöö) and inform the professional suitability assessment committee of the field of social work.