

CODE OF ETHICS OF SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALS

Adopted at the 3rd Estonian Congress on Social Work on 30 November 2005

1. Introduction

Modern legal systems differ from country to country in terms of their complexity and content. A professional social worker must be able to make decisions within existing legal space on the basis of general human values, commonly referred to as ethics. Irrespective of contradictions in legislation, a social worker should not ignore cases where help is required. Situations can occur in which a social worker is vulnerable and may, due to their own apprehension or fears related to safety, choose not to intervene in conflict situations, thereby damaging both the essence and reputation of social work.

All this being considered, the committee of ethics of the Estonian Association of Social Work undertook to create a code of ethics for social work professionals that complements legal acts and supports social work professionals in their difficult and much-needed work.

The purpose of the code of ethics of social work professionals is to support such professionals in their everyday work.

Where situations are not regulated by legislation or this document, the interests of the weakest party must be considered first.

This code of ethics is a constantly evolving set of views which is subject to review at least every four years.

2. Definitions

Social work – Professional activities designed to implement the principles of social justice, to improve quality of life, to develop social capital and to prevent, alleviate or eliminate difficulties in coping. Social work is by its nature preventive, alleviating, rehabilitative, guiding, caring or developing.

Social work professional – Any person working in the social welfare system, including social care providers, social workers, heads of welfare institutions, the Minister of Social Affairs and voluntary workers.

Client – An individual, a household, a group or a community who needs help to cope independently.

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

3. Source documents in social work

International declarations and conventions on human rights form an ethical basis that is recognised worldwide.

- United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Revised and amended European Social Charter

The following source documents regulate social work in Estonia:

- Constitution of the Republic of Estonia
- Social Welfare Act
- Child Protection Act
- Family Law Act
- Professions Act

4. General principles of ethical conduct of social work professionals

- 1) Social work professionals act in accordance with the interests of society, justify the client's trust in them and enhance and maintain the reputation of their profession.

- 2) Social work professionals support the inherent dignity and values of individuals and their right to well-being and dignified treatment.
- 3) Social work professionals pursue and promote the principles of social justice in their relationships with society and the people with or for whom they work.
- 4) Social work professionals oppose any form of discrimination and they work to ensure the well-being of people regardless of their capabilities, age, culture, gender, marital status, socio-economic status, political preferences, sexual orientation, beliefs, skin colour or other physical characteristics.
- 5) Social work professionals recognise and respect the ethnic and cultural diversity in the area they perform their duties and take into account individual, family, group and community differences.
- 6) Social work professionals take care to ensure and are responsible for ensuring that the resources at their disposal are distributed economically, fairly and according to need.
- 7) Social work professionals are obliged to draw the attention of the general public to, and to inform interest groups, politicians and their employers about, situations in which people live in poverty and where the allocation of resources is degrading and unfair or impairs the ability of individuals, households and communities to cope independently.
- 8) Social work professionals ensure that both the public and employers are aware of the content of this document and its expected impact on the activities of workers in the field of social work.
- 9) Social work professionals can initiate ethical discussions related to their work with the aim of finding the best solutions to problems.

5. Ethical conduct of social work professionals in working with clients

- 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 the code of professional ethics.
- 3) Social work professionals believe in the ability of their clients to take decisions concerning their own lives; provide delicate guidance for informed decisions; and acknowledge and respect the personal goals, responsibilities and civic rights of their clients within the limits of their capacity and competence.
- 4) Social work professionals act within the limits of their competence when working with clients, i.e. they do not make promises that they cannot keep.
- 5) In the case of unresolved conflicts of values and/or roles, social work professionals refer the client to other employees at the same level by agreement, informing their employer of this.
- 6) Social work professionals champion the well-being of their client/group of clients and of themselves, i.e.
 - a. respecting a client or partner's right to privacy and confidentiality;
 - b. supporting and maintaining a client's right to be trusted;
 - c. using the information at their disposal responsibly, in accordance with the rules established in the organisation or the agreement entered into with the client;
 - d. knowing their rights and exercising them ethically.
- 7) Social work professionals follow the customer service standards of their institution, take responsibility for meeting the objectives of the organisation and make proposals to amend them where necessary.
- 8) Social work professionals provide information to clients and partners in a comprehensible manner.

6. Ethical conduct of social work professionals in regard to colleagues and partners

- 1) Social work professionals respect the opinions of colleagues and partners and express both recognition and criticism in a responsible way via the relevant channels.
- 2) Social work professionals share and exchange their experience, knowledge and information with colleagues and partners.

- 3) Social work professionals are prepared to listen to colleagues, provide them with advice and empower them.
- 4) Social work professionals protect colleagues and partners from unfair treatment and criticism.
- 5) In the event of a conflict of roles, social work professionals take on clients from the colleague involved in the conflict.

7. Ethical conduct of social work professionals in regard to their profession

- 1) Social work professionals maintain and defend the profession of social work, value professional work and protect it from unfair criticism.
- 2) Social work professionals comply with and promote the ethical standards of the profession, participate in ethical debates and are responsible for the personal ethical decisions and choices made in professional work.
- 3) Social work professionals explain and disclose the basis, principles and professional practice of social work in order to facilitate public discussion and to enable the community to evaluate it. They also provide feedback to decision-makers.
- 4) Social work professionals develop their professional skills, being prepared to learn about new approaches and methods of social work and relying on research and analysis of practical work.
- 5) Social work professionals maintain and develop the knowledge and skills required for social work, taking care to maintain their levels of competence, professional development and performance.
- 6) Social work professionals act in an honest manner, distinguish between their personal life, work and social activities and do not use their position to achieve personal welfare or to gain any political advantage.
- 7) Social work professionals collect and share information in order to highlight social problems.
- 8) Social work professionals constantly and critically evaluate the values and ethical principles of social work in order to revise them in accordance with changes in society.

8. Management procedures for ethical conflicts

- 1) Social work professionals are attentive, note violations of the code of ethics and respond to such violations and defend the reputation of social work and their 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 makes enquiries concerning an ethical conflict and forms its opinion based on the responses before communicating the opinion to the persons involved.
- 4) If a social work professional seriously breaches the rules of the code of ethics and harms the reputation of social work through their behaviour, the committee of ethics may initiate a public discussion (including in the 'Social Work' journal) and inform the Occupational Qualifications Committee of Social Affairs of the violation.