

# Ethical Standards for Human Services Professionals

National Organization for Human Services adopted 2024

## Ethical Standards Subjects

<a href="#">Preamble</a>	<a href="#">Responsibility to the Public &amp; Society</a>
<a href="#">Responsibility to Clients</a>	<a href="#">Responsibility to Employers</a>
<a href="#">Responsibility to Colleagues</a>	<a href="#">Responsibility to Self</a>
<a href="#">Responsibility to the Profession</a>	<a href="#">Responsibility to Students</a>

### **PREAMBLE**

The field of human services is broadly defined, uniquely approaching the objective of meeting human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base, focusing on prevention as well as remediation of problems, and maintaining a commitment to improving the overall quality of life of service populations. The human services profession is one which promotes improved service delivery systems by addressing not only the quality of direct services, but also by seeking to improve accessibility, accountability, and coordination among professionals and agencies in service delivery.

#### Ethics Code Purpose:

The purpose of this ethics code is to establish a set of principles and standards to guide decision-making and conduct for all human services professionals. It serves to safeguard the well-being of clients, uphold the integrity of the profession, and foster trust and respect in all professional relationships. This code is designed to promote excellence in service delivery, ensure ethical practice in diverse social contexts, and address ethical dilemmas with professionalism and moral clarity. By adhering to this code, members commit to the highest standards of ethical behavior of their field which transcend legal requirements, foster enduring trust and respect, and advance the principles of human dignity, social justice, and responsible stewardship of the care placed in them by clients and society towards making profound contributions to their well-being.

Persons who use this code include members of the National Organization for Human Services, students in relevant academic degree programs, faculty in those same programs, researchers, administrators, practitioners, employers, supervisors, and others in community agencies who identify with the human services field (henceforth all are referred to throughout this code as human service professionals). The ethical standards are organized according to defined professional domains.

This ethics code emphasizes our unwavering commitment to ethical decision-making, a cornerstone of the human services profession. This commitment obliges all human service professionals to engage in continuous reflection, prioritize the welfare and rights of service recipients, and navigate complex ethical landscapes with diligence and moral clarity. It mandates the seeking of counsel and adherence to established ethical guidelines when confronting dilemmas, and ensures decisions are made with integrity and transparency.

## **RESPONSIBILITY TO CLIENTS**

**STANDARD 1** Human service professionals recognize and build on client and community strengths.

**STANDARD 2** At the beginning of the helping relationship, human service professionals obtain informed consent for services from clients. Clients should be informed that they may withdraw consent at any time and can ask questions before agreeing to the services. Clients who are unable to give consent should have those who are legally responsible for them review an informed consent statement document and provide appropriate consent. In the case of mandated services, human service professionals explain to clients their right to consent, including limitations to confidentiality and privacy, and possible consequences from service refusal.

**STANDARD 3** Human service professionals protect the client's right to privacy and confidentiality except when such confidentiality would cause serious harm to the client or others, when agency guidelines state otherwise, or under other stated conditions (e.g., local, state, or federal laws). Human service professionals inform clients of the limits of confidentiality prior to the onset of the helping relationship.

**STANDARD 4** When a human service professional suspects a client's behavior may endanger themselves or others, they must take appropriate and professional actions to ensure safety, which may include consulting, seeking supervision, or, in accordance with state and federal laws, breaching confidentiality.

**STANDARD 5** Human service professionals recognize the potential harm and impaired judgment resulting from dual or multiple relationships with clients. If such relationships cannot be avoided, professionals must assess whether to limit or forego the professional relationship and make appropriate referrals as needed.

**STANDARD 6** Human service professionals must not engage in sexual or romantic relationships with current clients. In the case of former clients, their friends, or family, professionals must thoroughly assess any potential harm or exploitative dynamics before considering such relationships.

**STANDARD 7** Human service professionals ensure that their values or biases are not imposed upon their clients.

**STANDARD 8** Human service professionals are responsible for safeguarding the integrity, safety, and security of client records. Client information, whether in written or electronic form, can only be shared with other professionals with the client's prior written consent, unless required or allowed by law or during professional supervision.

**STANDARD 9** When providing services through the use of technology, human service professionals take precautions to ensure and maintain confidentiality and comply with all relevant laws and requirements regarding storing, transmitting, and retrieving data. In addition, human service professionals ensure that

clients are aware of any issues and concerns related to confidentiality, service issues, and how technology might negatively or positively impact the helping relationship.

## **RESPONSIBILITY TO THE PUBLIC AND SOCIETY**

**STANDARD 10** Human service professionals are committed to delivering services equitably, ensuring inclusion and accessibility, and respecting diversity by valuing and affirming differences in age, ethnicity, culture, race, ability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, language preference, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, nationality, and other identities associated with historically marginalized groups.

**STANDARD 11** Human service professionals are knowledgeable about their cultures and communities within which they practice. They are aware of diversity in society and its impact on the community as well as individuals within the community. They respect the cultures and beliefs of individuals and groups.

**STANDARD 12** Human service professionals have a duty to be informed about relevant local, state, and federal laws. They bear the responsibility to advocate for amendments or changes in regulations and statutes when they conflict with the ethical standards and/or the rights of clients.

**STANDARD 13** Human service professionals stay informed about current social issues as they affect clients and communities. If appropriate to the helping relationship, they share this information with clients, groups, and communities as part of their work.

**STANDARD 14** Human service professionals are aware of social and political issues, comprehend their effects on clients, and recognize how the impact of such issues vary among individuals from diverse backgrounds.

**STANDARD 15** Human service professionals must establish processes to identify client needs and assets, actively draw attention to them, and facilitate planning and advocacy at individual, community, and societal levels to address them.

**STANDARD 16** Human service professionals advocate for social justice and seek to eliminate oppression. They raise awareness about systems of discrimination and inequity that affect historically minoritized and marginalized groups and advocate for systemic change to address these inequalities within their workplace, communities, and legislative systems.

**STANDARD 17** Human service professionals accurately represent the effectiveness of their treatment programs, interventions, and techniques, substantiating claims with empirical data and/or sound theoretical inferences whenever feasible.

## **RESPONSIBILITY TO COLLEAGUES**

**STANDARD 18** Human service professionals avoid duplicating another professional's helping relationship with a client. With written permission from their client, human service professionals consult with other professionals who are assisting the client in a different type of relationship when it is in the best interest of the client to do so.

**STANDARD 19** When human service professionals have a conflict with a colleague, they first seek out the colleague to manage the problem. If this effort fails, the professional then seeks the assistance of supervisors, consultants, or other professionals in efforts to address the conflict.

**STANDARD 20** Human service professionals have a duty to respond appropriately to unethical behavior of colleagues. This generally means first discussing the issue directly with the colleague in question, unless there are extenuating circumstances, such as concerns about repercussions due to an existing power relationship. If a satisfactory resolution is not reached or extenuating circumstances exist, the professional should report the colleague's behavior to a supervisor. If the potential unethical behavior is seen as egregious, then the individual should report the behavior to the colleague's professional association, credentialing board, police, and/or other administrators or boards, as appropriate.

**STANDARD 21** Clients have a right to information discussed between their helper and other professionals, except when state or federal law notes otherwise. All information discussed among professionals should be kept confidential from all others, except when withholding information would lead to harm to clients, others, or communities.

## **RESPONSIBILITY TO EMPLOYERS**

**STANDARD 22** Human service professionals honor their commitments to employers to the fullest extent possible.

**STANDARD 23** Human service professionals participate in efforts to establish and maintain employment conditions which are conducive to high quality client services. Whenever possible, they assist in evaluating the effectiveness of the agency through reliable and valid assessment measures.

**STANDARD 24** When a conflict arises between fulfilling the responsibility to the employer and the responsibility to the client, human service professionals work with all involved to manage the conflict.

## **RESPONSIBILITY TO THE PROFESSION**

**STANDARD 25** Human service professionals seek the training, experience, education, and supervision necessary to ensure their effectiveness in working with culturally diverse individuals, families, and communities.

**STANDARD 26** Human service professionals provide services only within their expertise and scope of practice, recognizing the limits to their knowledge and skills.

**STANDARD 27** Human service professionals must accurately represent their qualifications, encompassing, but not limited to, their skills, education, credentials, training, and areas of expertise, to the client, colleagues, and members of the public. When any intentional or accidental misrepresentation is discovered, they must take immediate action to rectify the situation.

**STANDARD 28** Human service professionals must pursue relevant consultation and supervision to guide their decision-making in the face of legal, ethical, or other complex dilemmas.

**STANDARD 29** Human service professionals promote cooperation across related disciplines, aiming to enhance professional development and maximize the benefits of inter-professional collaboration for clients at all levels.

**STANDARD 30** Human service professionals are committed to the continued development of the field. They promote professional association memberships, support research initiatives, foster educational advancement, advocate for appropriate legislative actions, and engage in other professional development activities.

**STANDARD 31** Human service professionals continually seek out new and effective approaches to enhance their professional abilities and use techniques that are evidence-based. When practicing techniques that are experimental or new, they inform clients of the status of such techniques as well as the possible risks and gain client consent for their usage.

**STANDARD 32** Human service professionals engage in research that upholds ethical standards, meets institutional standards, and maintains scientific integrity. Such research accounts for cross-cultural and diversity bias and is reported with transparency regarding its limitations.

**STANDARD 33** Human service professionals exercise discretion in sharing personal information on social media, knowing that they reflect the profession of human services. They also reflect on how their public behavior might impact their personal reputation and the perception of their professional community.

## **RESPONSIBILITY TO SELF**

**STANDARD 34** Human service professionals maintain awareness of their own cultural and diverse backgrounds, beliefs, values, and biases. They recognize the potential impact of these factors on their relationships with others and commit to delivering culturally competent services to all clients.

**STANDARD 35** Human service professionals are committed to their personal growth and well-being to ensure they provide the highest quality service to clients. Should they become aware of any physical, emotional, or psychological impediments to their ability to serve clients effectively, they direct clients to appropriate alternative services and seek measures for personal remediation of such impediments via consultation, treatment, or education.

**STANDARD 36** Human service professionals are dedicated to lifelong learning, consistently seeking to enhance their knowledge and skills to better serve their clients.

## **RESPONSIBILITY TO STUDENTS**

**STANDARD 37** Human service educators develop and implement teaching methodologies that are culturally sensitive, using pedagogical approaches that recognize student's diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

**STANDARD 38** Human service educators commit to fostering equity and inclusion, actively employing measures to ensure educational accessibility for students of all abilities.

**STANDARD 39** Human service educators uphold high standards of scholarship in their academic, pedagogical, and professional engagements. They remain abreast of developments in the field through active participation in professional associations, attendance at workshops and conferences, and engagement in both the review and conduct of research.

**STANDARD 40** Human service educators recognize and acknowledge the contributions of students to their work including, but not limited to, case material, grants, workshops, research, publications, and other related activities.

**STANDARD 41** Human service educators monitor students' field experiences to ensure the quality of the placement site, the supervisory experience, and that the educational outcomes align with the objectives of personal, professional, academic, career, and civic development of the student. When students experience potentially harmful situations during field placements, educators provide appropriate investigations and respond as necessary to safeguard the student.

**STANDARD 42** Human service educators establish and uphold appropriate guidelines regarding student disclosure of sensitive or personal information. This involves providing students with advance notice of any activities requiring self-disclosure, offering students the option to opt-out of in-depth self-disclosure when reasonable, and ensuring that there are processes in place to discuss and debrief these activities.

**STANDARD 43** Human service educators acknowledge the inherent power imbalance in their relationships with students and are committed to defining and upholding clear ethical and professional boundaries. This commitment includes avoiding any behavior that is demeaning, embarrassing, or exploitative. Human service educators are dedicated to treating all students with fairness and equity, actively working to eliminate discrimination in all forms, and ensuring a respectful and inclusive educational environment.

**STANDARD 44** Human service educators ensure that students are familiar with, guided by, and held accountable to the ethical standards and policies established by their academic program or department, the specific guidelines outlined in the course syllabus by the instructor, the expectations of their advisors, and the Ethical Standards of Human Service Professionals.

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