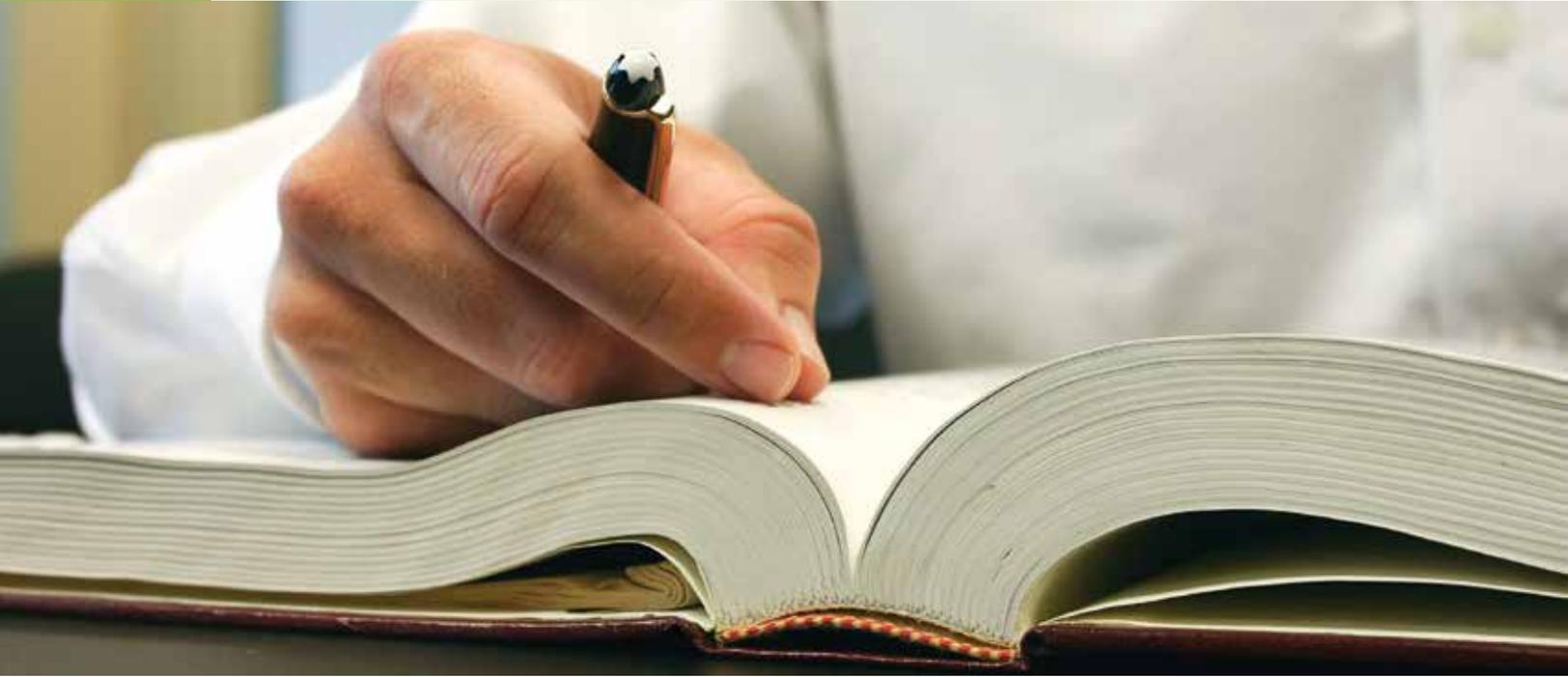




Practice Notes: Professional, Ethical, Qualified, Accountable: The Benefits of Registration

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Practice Notes is designed as an educational tool to help Ontario social workers, social service workers, employers and members of the public gain a better understanding of recurring issues dealt with by the Professional Practice Department and the Complaints Committee that may affect everyday practice. The notes offer general guidance only and members with specific practice inquiries should consult the College, since the relevant standards and appropriate course of action will vary depending on the situation.

The College regularly receives inquiries about the need for social workers or social service workers to be registered, or sometimes, if registered, a caller may want to know what the College is doing for them and their practice. These are important questions that can be explored by understanding fully the mandate of the College, the services offered to members and to the public, and the importance of being a registered professional.

Consider the following scenario:

A practitioner with a social work degree who had recently obtained employment in a small community agency called the College wondering whether to become registered. The caller was unsure as to the need to be registered since her employer did not require this as a condition of her employment. She was also unclear about the role of the College and what benefits she might get from her registration.

This scenario is best addressed by reviewing the mandate of the College, which highlights the importance of registration from the perspective of members, the public and employers.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS MANDATE

Social workers and social service workers are regulated under the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998* (SWSSWA). The College's mandate is to to serve and protect the public interest through self-regulation of the professions of social work and social service work. It accomplishes this by setting entry-to-practice requirements, setting and maintaining professional standards, ensuring members adhere to a code of ethics and standards of practice, requiring continuing competence activities and maintaining rigorous complaints and disciplinary processes. Despite its name, the College is a **self-regulatory body** and not an educational institution or school. Its role is also distinct from that of a professional association, whose mandate is



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to promote the profession and advocate in the interests of the profession and individual practitioners¹. The College is accountable to the Ministry of Community and Social Services. **Self-regulation** is a specific kind of regulation, in which the government delegates to a profession the power to regulate its peers. It is a privilege given to professions when they have reached a level of maturity such that:

- There is broad support for regulation within the profession(s).
- The profession has a specialized and recognized skill set and knowledge base which enable it to set standards and judge the conduct of its members.

Regulation is designed to ensure that the public receives services that are provided by **professional, ethical, qualified and accountable** practitioners. **Self-regulation** recognizes that those within the profession are in the best position to determine, evaluate and enforce the standards of practice of the profession. The SWSSWA protects the titles “social worker/registered social worker”, “social service worker/registered social service worker” as well as their short forms and French equivalents. Only those who are registered with the College can use any of the protected titles. Registration is also required for an individual to represent himself or herself or hold out as a “social worker” or “social service worker.”²

For the public, seeking a social worker or social service worker who can demonstrate they are registered with the College provides an element of legitimacy and assures potential clients they can expect a level of education, ethics, professionalism and accountability; it also provides a route (through the College’s complaints and discipline processes) for them to address concerns about a member’s practice.

Although regulation has as its ultimate goal the protection of the public, social workers and social service workers enjoy a less tangible benefit through their registration with the College - a level of professionalism that comes

with demonstrating to potential clients that they are a professional, ethical, qualified and accountable practitioner.

As a result of her contact with the College, the practitioner in the scenario above gained a better understanding of the College and its role, the legislation governing the practice of social work and social service work in Ontario, and the benefits of registration. She also learned that although the College does not regulate her employer by determining the qualifications for a given position, there were many good reasons for her to register with the College.

THE BENEFITS OF REGISTRATION FOR THE PUBLIC, EMPLOYERS AND MEMBERS

When a member of the public is looking for a social worker or social service worker, they often call the College or access the College’s online Public Register through the College website. The purpose of the Register is to help the public identify that a person is a social worker or social service worker registered with the College, and determine the person’s registration status, business address and discipline history, if any. This information assists the public, potential clients and employers in determining whether the professional in question is in good standing, subject to any terms, conditions or limitations on their certificate of registration, and/or discipline. The Register is another mechanism the College has which assists it in achieving its mandate of public protection.

Employers who choose to hire registered social workers and social services workers know that their employees’ membership in the College provides another level of accountability. This accountability and professionalism is clearly a benefit to clients, potential clients and (in the view of many employers) the agency.

Another important benefit of registration for both employers and members is the clear direction provided by the College in the form of the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook*. This important resource sets out the

1 The Ontario Association of Social Workers: <http://www.oasw.org/public/about-oasw/vision-and-mission-statement.aspx> and The Ontario Social Service Workers Association: <http://www.osswwa.ca/aboutus/>
2 The Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers Use of Title and Holding Out Provisions; www.ocswssw.org/publications



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minimum standards of practice for all members, but also guides practice leaders, managers, and others in leadership roles about the particular standards of practice from which they can build client services and develop policies. The College often receives inquiries from employers wishing to clarify standards as they build policy for their organization and make decisions for client groups.

PRACTICE RESOURCES AND THE NEED TO REMAIN COMPETENT

The benefits of registration also extend to those who are practising the professions. All members of the College must follow the minimum standards of practice set out in *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008*.³ The standards of practice are an essential resource to guide members throughout their career - whether they are teaching, training, working in policy or providing frontline clinical service, members must be aware of the minimum standards to which they are held accountable. *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook* also defines the scopes of practice for each profession; it is a kind of road map for members which, when utilized with other guiding legislation, policies and procedures in your work environment, as well as your professional judgment, can assist you immeasurably in your practice. The standards of practice consist of eight principles ranging from Responsibility to Clients, to Competence and Integrity, Fees, The Social Work and Social Service Work Record (documentation) and Confidentiality, all of which are meant to guide members in their decision-making. The standards of practice are the basis for guiding and assessing professional conduct, and the main resource in consultations with the College's Professional Practice Department (another important resource for members).

The College also provides a range of other resources to members which support and promote excellence in practice. These include: Practice Guidelines; Practice Notes and other articles found in the *Perspective* newsletter and in the Resource Room on the College website; and presentations, upon request, to members in their practice

environments and to educators and students in social work and social service work programs.

All of these resources help College members to ensure that they are practising competently and ethically, in accordance with the standards of practice. They are also meant to assist social workers and social service workers in puzzling through the complex and challenging issues they may face in their practice settings throughout their career.

Consider the following scenario:

A registered social service worker called the College requesting guidance about how to manage a client whose challenges and needs were beginning to feel overwhelming for the member. He was concerned that he did not necessarily have the skills and competence required to assist the client, yet he felt that he might be obligated to continue to see the client. He was seeking guidance from the College about what to do.

Members of the College frequently call the Professional Practice Department, asking for assistance in interpreting the standards of practice and applying them to dilemmas that they are facing. Some members, like the one in the scenario above, feel they are obliged to continue with a client with whom they have begun to provide service; they may be worried that not continuing to work with a client they feel they may not be qualified to assist might be unprofessional or unethical.

Professional Practice staff assisted the member by helping him to identify the issues involved and the relevant standards that he should consider in order to determine his next steps. Principle II: Competence and Integrity states that "College members are responsible for being aware of the extent and parameters of their competence and their professional scope of practice and limit their practice accordingly. When a client's needs fall outside the College member's usual area of practice, the member

³ The *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008* available on the College website at www.ocswssw.org.



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informs the client of the option to be referred to another professional".⁴

In the course of the practice consultation, the member determined that he was justified in helping the client make the successful transition to another professional who had the particular skill set required to assist them. He realized that helping a client to move on to another professional may be in the best interests of the client and thus a professional and ethical decision that is supported by the standards of practice.

CONTINUING COMPETENCE

Registration with the College demonstrates to the public that you are qualified and current in your practice, and that you continue to learn and develop as a professional. This assurance of your currency and commitment to ongoing education is also a benefit to you, as a member of the College. In accordance with the Registration Regulation, O. Reg. 383/00 made under the SWSSWA, all members must provide evidence of their continuing competence to practise social work or social service work, according to the guidelines set by the College.

Consider the following scenario:

A member of the public contacted the Professional Practice Department with a concern about a social work member in private practice to whom she had recently brought her teenaged son for support. Although the caller's son seemed to like the social worker, the mother's concerns stemmed from reading material that the social worker had provided to them as a resource. The resources seem old and out of date, leaving the mother to wonder if the social worker was current in her practice and competent to provide service to her young son.

It is important to consider the standards of practice in addition to the continuing competence requirements in the Registration Regulation when considering this scenario.

The following interpretations in Principle II: Competence and Integrity are relevant:

2.1: College members are committed to ongoing professional development and maintaining competence in their practice.

2.1.2: College members remain current with emerging social work or social service work knowledge and practice relevant to their areas of professional practice. Members demonstrate their commitment to ongoing professional development by engaging in any continuing education and complying with continuing competence measures required by the College.

2.1.5: As part of maintaining competence and acquiring skills in social work or social service work practice, College members engage in the process of self-review and evaluation of their practice and seek consultation where appropriate.

In this scenario, the member may wish to review her resources and materials to ensure they reflect an awareness of the current literature. Engaging in such a review is something the member could do as part of her Continuing Competence Program (CCP) requirements.

The CCP is mandatory for all members of the College (including those who are not currently practising, are Inactive members, are on maternity, parental or sick leave, or who registered late in the year). Its primary purpose is to promote quality assurance with respect to the practice of the professions of social work and social service work, and to encourage members to enhance their practice in an ongoing way. The CCP, which is self-directed and highly flexible, provides multiple opportunities through which members ensure ongoing competence. Reading articles, doing research on the internet, reading books, volunteering, as well as attending workshops, conferences or seminars (including webinars) or supervising students are all legitimate learning activities under the CCP.

⁴ Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle II; Competence and Integrity, 2.1.1.



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Maintaining competence through the CCP is one of the ways a practitioner can ensure that they are providing services to clients “that are appropriately substantiated by evidence and supported by a credible body of professional social work knowledge or credible body of social service work knowledge.”⁵

CONCLUSION

The College regulates the practice of social work and social service work in Ontario and ensures that the

thousands of registered social workers and registered social service workers in the province are professional and accountable to the public that they serve. Benefiting the public, employers and members, your registration is a clear indicator that you are ethical, professional, qualified and accountable.

For more information, please contact the Professional Practice Department at practice@ocswssw.org.

5 Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle II; Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.1.4