

# Social Worker Professional Development in 2022

## NSCSW Quality Assurance Report



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## Who we are

### About us

The Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) is the regulatory body for social workers in Nova Scotia. Our mandate is to serve and protect Nova Scotians by effectively regulating the profession of social work.

We establish, maintain, and regulate standards of professional practice. Our role is to ensure that Nova Scotians receive the services of skilled and competent social workers who are knowledgeable, ethical, qualified, and accountable to the people who receive social work services. We provide responsive, accountable leadership to ensure the highest standards of social work for Nova Scotians.

The people of Nova Scotia are entitled to receive the highest calibre of care from their social workers. To ensure this, we provide membership services to support social workers in maintaining the highest standards of professional competency, enabling participation in a broader provincial social work community.

Social workers provide an essential service to support Nova Scotians in leading healthier, happier lives. The NSCSW engages with Nova Scotia's social work community in advocating for improvement to social policies, programs, and social justice. We engage with members, government, employers, community groups, and citizens to build a stronger social work community, and to advance the social work profession in Nova Scotia. We work in solidarity with Nova Scotians to advocate for policies that improve social conditions, challenge injustice and value diversity.

### Our values

Our work is grounded in integrity and professionalism which calls on us to be:

#### **Respectful**

*The NSCSW is respectful of the inherent dignity of every individual, and strives for cultural humility and social change.*

#### **Accessible**

*The NSCSW provides communication and services that are accessible province-wide for members, stakeholders, and the public.*

#### **Ethical**

*The NSCSW follows the established national code of ethics that adheres to the values of the social work profession.*

#### **Progressive**

*The NSCSW is proactive in reflecting the values of social work, and supports innovation through education, research, and transformative community engagement, for the sake of social justice.*



## Introduction

This report offers an in-depth analysis of the quality assurance measures applied to the NSCSW's professional development program. A primary component of our mandate is public protection and safety, which we uphold by ensuring that social workers are engaged in meaningful continuing education aimed at mitigating risk and enhancing safety to the public and social workers. This commitment aligns with the Standards of Practice, which stipulate that social workers must continually update and refine their professional skills to reflect the latest advancements and methodologies within the field of social work. Through rigorous adherence to these standards, we strive to guarantee that all social workers are equipped with the most current knowledge and best practices in the profession.

## Purpose of quality assurance in regulation

Quality assurance in regulation serves as a cornerstone in maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of professional standards and competencies. It is an essential mechanism that ensures the consistent delivery of high-quality services, which is particularly crucial in fields such as social work where the wellbeing of individuals and communities is at stake.

Quality assurance goes beyond mere compliance with established standards. It seeks to foster a culture of continuous improvement, encouraging professionals to constantly enhance their skills and knowledge. This is achieved through various means such as regular assessments, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms.

One of the key roles of quality assurance is promoting public trust and confidence. When professionals adhere to recognized standards and continually strive for excellence, it reassures the public about the quality and reliability of the services they receive. This trust is vital in building strong, supportive relationships between social workers and the communities they serve.

Furthermore, quality assurance safeguards the interests of service users. This involves ensuring that services are delivered ethically, effectively, and responsibly. It means holding professionals and systems accountable for their actions and ensuring that any concerns or complaints are addressed appropriately. It entails safer practice for the most vulnerable members of society.

In essence, the purpose of quality assurance in regulation is twofold: it aims to support professionals in delivering the best possible services, while also protecting the rights and interests of those who rely on these services. By achieving this balance, quality assurance contributes significantly to the overall health and effectiveness of the profession.

## NSCSW's professional development standards

The primary goal of professional development is the safety of the public.

The social work profession has evolved over time and continues to do so; likewise, social workers must continue learning throughout their career, to increase their knowledge and skills for the benefit of the people and communities they work alongside. The College's professional development standards are designed to ensure that social workers are accountable for maintaining and adding to their skills, and staying abreast of the evolving trends in the field, thus ensuring high-quality service delivery.

The NSCSW's professional development standards have multiple elements, such as:

- **Mandated Topics:** Social workers in Nova Scotia are required to complete annually six hours of professional development on five mandated topics. These include:
  1. social work ethics,
  2. anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice,
  3. truth & reconciliation,
  4. vicarious trauma & secondary stress, and
  5. social justice.

This requirement ensures that social workers are well-equipped to address contemporary challenges and uphold the principles of the profession, as well as ensuring the safety of those individuals and communities who are most vulnerable to discrimination.

- **Discretionary Topics:** Members have flexibility to select professional development that aligns with their practice, interests, workplace needs, and professional goals.
  - **Formal Professional Development:** Active members are required to participate in formal professional development activities related to social work. This could include continuing education workshops, online courses, or conferences that provide in-depth knowledge and practical skills.
  - **Informal Professional Development:** Recognizing that learning can occur outside formal settings, members can also engage in informal activities and independent learning to further their understanding of social work. This could include reviewing published materials with content related to social work (books, journals, documentaries, etc.), volunteering on a board or committee, or participating in the College's general meetings.

Some subcategories of informal activities have maximums applied. For example, social workers may undertake activities that are not directly related to social work but are intended to enhance their practice and career development, such as first-aid training, computer skill classes, or learning a new language; up to five hours of these professional and technical knowledge activities are eligible to be included in each member's annual inventory.

The hours of professional development a member is expected to complete on discretionary topics will vary depending on their member class and status.

## NSCSW's professional development program

The NSCSW's member services contribute to protection of the public by facilitating members' compliance with (and understanding of) regulatory standards. The cornerstone of these member services is College's professional development program, which is a comprehensive initiative that aims to foster continuous learning and development for social workers in Nova Scotia.

The program encompasses a wide array of initiatives, such as the College's annual conference, interdisciplinary mini-conferences, year-round virtual lunch & learns, and advocacy events open to the general public. NSCSW launched a joint professional development initiative in partnership with the Diversity and Equity Committee at the Dalhousie School of Social Work in 2023, offering evening panel discussions intended to bridge gaps between

academia and practice. NSCSW is also part of the Canadian Association of Social Workers, which provides our members with access to online journals and a robust webinar program.

Through these varied avenues, the NSCSW's professional development program ensures that social workers have systemic support to grow, adapt, and thrive in their roles while upholding the highest standards of the profession.

## Quality assurance methods

The NSCSW employs a comprehensive and systematic approach to ensure that members meet the professional development standards set forth by the organization.

1. **Annual Randomized QA Process:** Staff conducted an annual randomized quality assurance process. This process is designed to confirm whether members are adhering to the professional development standards outlined by the NSCSW. This thorough review helps to maintain the integrity of the profession and ensures a uniform application of the standards across all members.

Selection of members for participation in this process was weighted to be representative of percentages of each member category. All members registered with NSCSW in 2022 and active in 2023 were assigned a random number within their membership category, sorted from lowest to highest, and the applicable number of members from each category were selected from the top of the lists.

2. **Selection Criteria for Professional Development Activities:** The NSCSW is developing specific selection criteria for professional development activities. These include:
  - a. relevance to the field of social work,
  - b. collaboration,
  - c. focus on justice,
  - d. applicability to practice,
  - e. future-orientation,
  - f. fostering critical thinking and self-reflection, and
  - g. sustainability.

These criteria are intended to ensure that the selected activities contribute meaningfully to the professional growth of social workers and align with the broader goals of the profession. They were developed in response to questions received by the NSCSW from members during the first renewal period following the implementation of the new professional development requirements.

NSCSW is beginning to apply these selection criteria internally as part of planning the College's professional development programming. Guidelines are under development to support members in applying these criteria to their personal professional development plans as well.

3. **Assessment Using Selection Criteria:** The assessment process applies the above criteria to the activities submitted by members, to consider whether members' independently selected professional development activities are consistent with our priorities and contribute effectively to the ongoing growth and development of our membership.

Compliance with these selection criteria is not yet an explicit regulatory requirement for individual members. However, assessing to what degree our members' professional development practices are already aligning with these criteria will help guide the College's plans for developing future regulations, regulatory communications, and member services.

In essence, the multifaceted approach ensures that the NSCSW's professional development standards remain effective, relevant, and valuable in supporting the continuous professional growth of social workers in Nova Scotia.

## Results of quality assurance process

In August 2023, the NSCSW engaged in a quality assurance process, in accordance with its professional development policy, in order to ensure that its members understood and were complying with the new learning requirements that had been implemented in 2022.

This assessment reviewed the 2022 submissions of professional development activities of 20 randomly selected NSCSW members that included a proportional amount of SWCs, RSWs, private practitioners and associate members, with a representative sample of both BSW and MSW education levels. All entries were de-identified prior to being reviewed; participants were identified by number rather than name.

A second level of de-identification was completed by staff to ensure confidentiality prior to aggregated data and themes being shared with the professional development committee and Council, as part of the College's commitment to utilizing this evaluation process as an opportunity to learn and improve. All professional development entries were reviewed and assessed using the selection criteria noted above, and written reflections were also evaluated with this same methodology.

While the policy outlines the requirement to submit documentation to support professional development entries, the renewal website allows members to bypass this requirement in cases of technical issues. Members who did not submit supporting documentation were therefore asked to supply this, as per the professional development policy.

Themes and trends will be utilized by the NSCSW and its various committees to ensure that it continues to refine the ways it develops, delivers, oversees and evaluates the professional development of its members, as part of its larger commitment to protecting the public and ensuring safer social work practice with the most vulnerable and historically oppressed individuals and communities.

Based on the results of the assessment, the following key points were identified.

### Strengths

- Overall NSCSW members engaged in the critical reflection activities with thoughtful assessments of the ways that their learning will be integrated into their practice to ensure the safety and well-being of those individuals and communities that they serve.
- Overall RSWs who were in private practice or associate status demonstrated near total compliance with the professional development requirements.
- Feedback on the new professional development requirements was overwhelmingly positive and members reflected upon these in their submitted comments.



- Members participated in varied professional development activities, but a significant number of them participated in those offered by the NSCSW; this demonstrates that many members deem the College's professional development program to provide quality learning experiences that are relevant to their practice and personal/professional goals.
- The number of members who rely on the NSCSW's programming for their professional development provides the NSCSW with the unique ability to guide our members in the ways that social work is delivered across the province, thereby further ensuring public safety and accountability, as part of its strategic goals.

## Opportunities for improvement

- The biggest challenges observed in the reporting of professional development activities were members in the SWC member class. This supports the need for candidacy as an important method to regulate the social work profession and ensure safety, by providing social workers who are new (or returning) to the profession with the supportive mentorship and learning that they need.
- Some SWC members claimed their candidacy hours, which is not permitted. However, mentors may do so for their participation in the Candidacy Mentorship Program; mentorship is voluntary service to the profession, while candidacy is a regulatory requirement. It may be that inconsistency in how this was communicated online contributed to the confusion of SWC members.
- Some members, especially those who are registered as SWCs, seemed confused as to what types of activities are eligible to meet the requirement for professional development designed to mitigate against vicarious trauma and secondary stress. This was true across the board, with some people claiming walks on the beach and thanksgiving time with family for example, as professional development (as opposed to attending a lecture on the risks of vicarious trauma or participating in therapy, which was the intent).
  - The selection and evaluation criteria under development should help to address this by providing additional criteria to help members select activities that meet the intent of the policy (for example, by ensuring that they are relevant to the practice of social work).
- There was a trend of members trying to track and submit more than the 5-hour max of informal professional development for training on CPR, with one participant seeking to submit 17 hours of training in CPR.
- There was some confusion as to what is eligible for consideration as social work ethics training, with some members tracking educational activities that were not directly related to ethics but were related to social work more broadly.
- There was confusion over the inability to track and submit movies and reading books beyond the 5-hour maximum.
- There were several members that engaged in training on nonviolent crisis de-escalation, but confusion as to whether it was eligible to be tracked towards the requirements regarding vicarious trauma or social work ethics (the two categories that need further clarification overall).

## Recommendations

To continue improving the effectiveness of our professional development standards, we recommend the following:





1. Given that the bulk of the challenges observed during this quality assurance report involved SWC members, it would be advisable to consider a targeted communication and support process for candidates who are submitting their professional development, and guidance for mentors to be able to support candidates in this way.
2. There should be some education and tips provided to all members in those areas where trends were observed, as noted above, including:
  - a) the criteria for selection and evaluation of PD;
  - b) the need for documentation to be submitted for formal activities as part of their professional development tracking process online;
  - c) the need for documentation of formal activities to be preserved, per the existing policy;
  - d) the need for clarification about the following PD topics: social work ethics, vicarious trauma and secondary stress, CPR and first aid, and nonviolent crisis de-escalation; and
  - e) the need for clarification about how many hours of movies are eligible to be included.
3. While compliant with the existing policy, some members only included the required minimum hours of training on issues of truth and reconciliation, and anti-racist/anti-discriminatory practice. In order to ensure safer practice with historically marginalized and oppressed populations, the College should consider whether these requirements need to be expanded.
4. Similarly, in order to fulfill our commitments to participate in fulfilling the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action, it would be beneficial for the professional development committee to continue to provide guidance in this area (e.g. what the calls to action are, the role of social workers in those processes, and what may be eligible as related professional development).
5. Taking into account the recommendations above, along with the extensive professional development reflections submitted by many members, it would be advantageous to develop a system for critical self-evaluation. This system could provide an avenue for members to delve deeper into their professional growth, particularly when working with historically marginalized and oppressed groups. A key aspect of this process should be an emphasis on recognizing one's own bias and positionality. Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate a risk assessment to identify and address any potential biases that may exist. This approach will not only ensure accountability but also support further reflection and professional development

## Conclusion

Quality assurance is an ongoing process. We will continue to evaluate and improve our professional development standards (and related member services) to ensure it meets the evolving needs of social workers and contributes effectively to the quality of social work practice in Nova Scotia. We strive to maintain the accountability of our profession to the public, and ensure safer practice with the most vulnerable and historically oppressed populations.

This report endeavours to further the NSCSW's commitment to continuous improvement, in our constant quest to promote the profession and protect the public, as well as our commitment to participate in the ongoing process of truth and reconciliation.