



**ACWA**

AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY  
WORKERS ASSOCIATION

# Australian Community Workers Ethics and Good Practice Guide





This publication, which combines the code of ethics and practice guidelines, is supported by additional resources including self-assessment and supervisor-supported assessment tools which can be downloaded individually from [www.acwa.org.au](http://www.acwa.org.au). Further resources are available to members within the members' only area of the website.

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# Code of ethics



## Introduction

Most professions expect their members to meet a standard of ethical behaviour and this requirement is often formalised through a code of ethics which then informs practice. In the case of community work this is essential because practitioners often work with the most vulnerable and marginalised groups of people in our society. This practitioner-client relationship may be defined in a number of ways but in this document, is taken to mean that which has resulted through the engagement of an individual, group, or community with the services of a community worker.

The Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) code of ethics sets the foundation for exemplary community work practice and is the benchmark for all practitioners. As the professional association for community workers ACWA has defined a community work practitioner as a person who holds a relevant qualification and has the values, knowledge and skills to work independently or with others in an agency or program intended to facilitate or ensure social inclusion. The community worker is therefore expected to acknowledge and respect the worth of all individuals regardless of their race, religion, age, gender, sexual and gender diversity, and other individual differences.

Conduct opposed to the full recognition of human dignity and individual rights within the community worker's professional practice shall be considered improper and unacceptable within the community work profession and to the Australian Community Workers Association.

## Principles underlying the code of ethics

1. Every human being, regardless of race, religion, gender, age, sexual and gender diversity, or other individual differences has a right to maximise his or her potential providing it does not infringe upon the rights of others.
2. Social inclusion is a human right where every individual has an active role to play in society and has the expectation of full social, educational and economic participation. An inclusive society is based on the fundamental values of equity, equality, social justice, and human rights and freedoms, as well as on the principles of tolerance and embracing diversity.
3. Every society has an obligation to provide for and deal equitably with all its members and to make extra provision for those who are excluded or disadvantaged.
4. Every person is legally protected against discrimination on the basis of age, sex, race and disability and their universal human rights are inviolable.
5. The Australian Community Workers Association recognises Australia's first people and their right to self-determination.

## Responsibility to clients

1. The community worker:
  - shall determine with the client or client group the exact nature of the relationship, the role of the community worker, and clarify the expectations of the client shall regard all information concerning clients as confidential except where:
    - with the permission of the client, referrals are to be made or other professional consultation, opinion or advice is sought;
    - failure to disclose information would breach the terms of the community worker's employment (such exceptions must be notified to the client); or where
    - failure to disclose information would contravene mandatory reporting requirements or other legal obligations
  - has an obligation to treat clients with dignity and to safeguard, promote and acknowledge their capacity for self-determination
  - in exercising certain powers and using information, is accountable to the client to ensure that:
    - they are fully informed of their rights;
    - have choices; and
    - can access information about themselves
  - will improve their skills and knowledge for the benefit of the client
  - will establish and maintain professional boundaries with clients at all times and not form personal relationships that compromise the primary practitioner-client relationship.

## Responsibility to employers

2. The community worker, as an employee, is expected to:
  - carry out the duties and responsibilities of the role as outlined in their terms of employment by adhering to the stated aims, policies and procedures of the employing body
  - achieve the aims of the employing organisation without denying clients their rights
  - bring to the employer's attention where organisational expectations or practices contravene the profession's code of ethics
    - particularly in the area of client rights
  - maintain a professional relationship with clients at all times and disclose any out-of-hours contact or social media contact
  - act responsibly in the expenditure of public monies.

## Responsibility to colleagues

3. The community worker is expected to:
  - share professional knowledge and insights with colleagues
  - respect the skills, knowledge and experience of colleagues including volunteers
  - be generous in using their skills and knowledge to enhance the practical fieldwork education of students
  - discuss any unethical behaviour that may have been observed in a colleague directly with their colleague unless to do so would pose a risk to a client or the practitioner
  - acknowledge and observe the legal rights and protections of colleagues, including, but not restricted to, confidentiality and privacy, workplace health and safety, and anti-discrimination legislation.

## Protecting the reputation of the profession

4. The community worker will:

- maintain, through ongoing education and training, the standards required for exemplary and contemporary practice
- address in a timely manner and through an appropriate channel any behaviour in a colleague or an employer that is either incompatible with this code, or impinges on the rights of clients and their families, or contravenes the law
- seek advice when unsure of a course of action and make informed decisions
- participate in any complaint process if a public complaint is brought against them
- distinguish in public statements, for example on social media, whether acting as an authorised spokesperson of their organisation or in a private capacity
- respect the rights and legal protections of others
- act responsibly in the expenditure of public monies
- disclose any improper relationship between a colleague and client
- meet the expectations of this code and the practice standards at all times.



These guidelines define a standard of practice to which the Australian Community Workers Association holds its members accountable. They are, however, relevant to all community workers including those involved in intake, support, case work, crisis intervention, team management, community development and advocacy roles across all fields of practice. The guidelines have been developed in consultation with practitioners, industry partners, and education providers, and exemplify what is generally considered to be good practice in the sector.

All community workers, regardless of qualification, industry experience or specialisation, need to demonstrate throughout their career that they meet a recognised and ethical standard of practice, which protects the client, the community, and the practitioner.

These practice guidelines are underpinned by a code of ethics, and it is within this ethical framework that exemplary community work practice occurs.

## Values underpinning ethical practice

Like all other professions, community work is shaped by a code of ethics and a set of values that guide the qualified practitioner. For the community worker, a commitment to social inclusion and social justice is fundamental to their practice, along with a respect for the individual and his or her right to self-determination.

## How to use the guidelines

These guidelines, along with their indicators, have been written to provide a framework for community work practice. Originally conceived as standards, the new guidelines expand upon the *Australian Community Workers Code of Ethics* and provide a benchmark for experienced practitioners, as well as a guide for new community workers entering the profession. The guidelines are not intended to conflict with the requirements of an employing organisation but they do set out a minimum acceptable standard. The guidelines are written in such a way that practitioners can assess themselves against the indicators and plan their professional development accordingly.

## The guidelines

- Guideline 1 Ethical practice**
- Guideline 2 Provision of service and supports**
- Guideline 3 Confidentiality in the workplace**
- Guideline 4 The regulatory framework**
- Guideline 5 Diversity**
- Guideline 6 The workplace**
- Guideline 7 Professional development**
- Guideline 8 Professional standing**

### Guideline 1 *Ethical practice*

A community work practitioner, in providing services to individuals and communities, should work in accordance with a code of ethics and in agreement with the principles of individual worth and the individual's right to social inclusion.

#### Indicators

To comply with the intent of this guideline a community work practitioner will be required to:

- 1.1 Apply the principles of social justice, equity, individual worth, human dignity and self-determination in all day to day professional practice.
- 1.2 Practice ethical behaviour in every situation in accordance with the Australian Community Workers Code of ethics.
- 1.3 Seek advice, if required, when confronted with an ethical dilemma.
- 1.4 Challenge policies and practices that are unjust or fail to meet accepted community standards such as human and legal rights, social inclusion and self-determination.
- 1.5 Reflect on personal beliefs and values and identify those that might impact on the rights of others.
- 1.6 Base relationships with service users or groups on the principles of respect and human dignity regardless of a service user's own attitudes or behaviour.
- 1.7 Identify and appropriately address ethical issues, such as breaches of confidentiality, privacy, and professional boundaries that may occur when using online tools for service provision.
- 1.8 Use resources and public monies responsibly and for their specified purpose.
- 1.9 Use knowledge and skills for the benefit of the service user, the employing organisation and the common good.

### Guideline 2 *Provision of services and supports*

A community work practitioner should base her or his professional practice on the theory of community work and the principle that individuals, families, groups and communities have a fundamental human right to access appropriate services and support.

#### Indicators

To comply with the intent of this guideline a community work practitioner will be required to:

- 2.1 Provide services that meet the needs of individuals and communities and facilitate their right to social inclusion or social justice.
- 2.2 Encourage service users to actively provide feedback on the effectiveness or otherwise of services.
- 2.3 Routinely advise service users of their right to complain and how to access the organisation's complaints policy.
- 2.4 Ensure that they do not discriminate against or in any way disadvantage a service user who has made a complaint.
- 2.5 Use appropriate research, planning and evaluation methodologies when providing community and human services.
- 2.6 Facilitate effective outcomes by routinely monitoring, evaluating and improving upon services, programs and projects.
- 2.7 Retain currency in theory and practice to underpin all service provision.
- 2.8 Advocate for service users and needed services.
- 2.9 Recognise the sometimes imbalance of power between themselves and service users and take care to not abuse that authority.

### Guideline 3 *Confidentiality in the workplace*

A community work practitioner should understand and comply with all legislation and guidelines that provide for confidentiality and privacy of service users, colleagues and employers.

#### **Indicators**

To comply with the intent of this guideline a community work practitioner will be required to:

- 3.1 Be familiar with the relevant legislation and the organisational policies relating to confidentiality and privacy.
- 3.2 Inform service users as to who has access to his or her file and under what circumstances the information contained therein is or may be shared.
- 3.3 Provide service users with access to their own files and make them aware of the process to record or amend any representation, notation or omission with which they disagree.
- 3.4 Protect a service user's privacy through secure record keeping.
- 3.5 Seek informed consent from service users before any confidential information is shared, unless required by law.
- 3.6 Advocate for non-disclosure of confidential information where a practitioner believes that disclosure would adversely affect a service user.
- 3.7 Provide privacy to service users who wish to discuss sensitive matters.
- 3.8 Destroy obsolete confidential information or records in a secure manner.
- 3.9 Apply the principles of confidentiality to information that pertains to colleagues and employers.
- 3.10 Remind colleagues, who disclose confidential information, of their obligations under the various legislation and policy requirements that govern the workplace.

### Guideline 4 *The regulatory framework*

A community work practitioner often works within complex organisational structures governed by legislation or statute. The practitioner must, therefore, understand the sometimes seemingly contradictory frameworks that impact either on service provision or the service users with whom they work.

#### **Indicators**

To comply with the intent of this guideline a community work practitioner will be required to:

- 4.1 Comply with legislation and statutory provisions, for example, mandatory reporting, which affect professional practice.
- 4.2 Alert their employer of relevant legislation not observed by the organisation.
- 4.3 Deal with service-user information in accordance with the principles and requirements of legislation including that which governs privacy, confidentiality and freedom of information.
- 4.4 Work within the legal limitations around the right to confidentiality.
- 4.5 Inform service users about the legal limitations to their right to confidentiality and privacy.
- 4.6 Ensure information systems relating to service users, resources, programs and projects are in place, and kept in accordance with legislation and organisational policy and procedural requirements.
- 4.7 Ensure that the fundamental human rights of an individual are not impinged through the misuse of authority granted through law.
- 4.8 Understand which pieces of legislation govern organisational behaviours, for example, workplace health and safety, and inform the service user group wherever necessary.



## Guideline 5 *Diversity*

A community worker works within diverse communities and should demonstrate in all of her or his professional practice an understanding and sensitivity to diversity in all forms and her or his compliance with all relevant legislation.

### Indicators

To comply with the intent of this guideline a community work practitioner will be required to:

- 5.1 Respond appropriately to diversity in all its forms.
- 5.2 Acknowledge and promote the rights of culturally and other diverse groups.
- 5.3 Challenge organisational behaviours and services that discriminate on the basis of individual or group characteristics including ability, age, beliefs, economic, employment and housing status, ethnicity, faith, gender and gender identity, and sexuality.
- 5.4 Recognise personal values and bias and takes steps to safeguard against any adverse impact these might have on a service user's right to a service. Recognise and declare conflicts of interest.
- 5.5 Gain information from relevant individuals and Indigenous and culturally diverse communities to ensure professional practice, policy, or service development is appropriate to community and service user needs.
- 5.6 Engage in individual and collaborative knowledge building to ensure professional practice with culturally or otherwise diverse or minority groups is appropriate and effective.
- 5.7 Adapt communication means and methods to effectively connect with a diverse range of people.
- 5.8 Use culturally appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication when engaging with individuals and community members.

## Guideline 6 *The workplace*

A community work practitioner rarely works alone and should treat her or his workplace with respect and take personal responsibility to ensure that it is a productive, safe and healthy environment within which they, service users, colleagues or residents can work or live.

### Indicators

To comply with the intent of this guideline a community work practitioner will be required to:

- 6.1 Understand and respect the nature and context of the workplace, which may also be the residence or home of service users.
- 6.2 Continually develop and use knowledge and skills within the workplace for the benefit of service users, colleagues and employers.
- 6.3 Maintain professional boundaries with service users and colleagues.
- 6.4 Acknowledge and protect confidential, sensitive or commercially valuable workplace information and intellectual property.
- 6.5 Treat colleagues with respect, honesty and consideration.
- 6.6 Deal with conflict in a timely manner.
- 6.7 Report discriminatory, bullying or otherwise adverse behaviour by a colleague toward clients or another staff person.
- 6.8 Recognise and act upon individual responsibility for workplace health and safety.
- 6.9 Understand and implement organisational policy and procedures.
- 6.10 Take up any areas of concern, either regarding policies, service provision or workplace behaviors with the appropriate supervisor, manager or employer.

## Guideline 7 *Professional development*

The education of a community work practitioner does not cease upon graduation. It is incumbent on the community worker to undertake relevant professional development throughout her or his career to ensure their knowledge remains current and informs their everyday practice.

### Indicators

To comply with the intent of this guideline a community work practitioner will be required to:

- 7.1 Identify skill and knowledge gaps and remedy through training, supervision or other means.
- 7.2 Seek appropriate professional support, mentoring or advice to address personal and professional limitations.
- 7.3 Critically analyse the profession, human service agencies and organisations, and social institutions in all aspects of the community work role.
- 7.4 Acknowledge personal responsibility and accountability for actions, decisions and professional development.
- 7.5 Increase new knowledge and information about the profession, the sector or areas of practice through active engagement with research and enquiry.
- 7.6 Keep abreast of current research, models of practice, and theory.
- 7.7 Supervise students, staff and volunteers in an ethical manner and from an appropriately qualified knowledge base.
- 7.8 Share information and knowledge with colleagues.

## Guideline 8 *Professional standing*

Community work practitioners not only represent the interests of service users and employers but are also representatives of the community work profession. Community workers should therefore, practice with integrity and not engage in any behaviour that brings the profession or other practitioners into disrepute.

### Indicators

To comply with the intent of this guideline a community work practitioner will be required to:

- 8.1 Know, understand and work within the ethical norms of the profession.
- 8.2 Maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries with service users and colleagues.
- 8.3 Seek support and guidance when personal issues are affecting professional conduct or practice.
- 8.4 Recognise and redress inadequate knowledge and experience is through professional development, training, support or supervision.
- 8.5 Promptly address the inappropriate, unethical or illegal behaviour of a colleague through suitable means.
- 8.6 Exhibit awareness of social, political, legal, cultural and organisational contexts and systems, and how they might impact on the community work profession.
- 8.7 Acknowledge and support the right of service users, carers, members of the public and colleagues to make a complaint against the unethical, unprofessional or inept practice of a community work practitioner.
- 8.8 Demonstrate an understanding of relevant legislation and legal frameworks which specify responsibilities towards clients, colleagues, employers or community members in the workplace.
- 8.9 Promote, take pride in, and advance the profession of community work.
- 8.10 Recognise that private behaviour should not have an adverse impact on professional practice or the profession.