

VIRGINIA BOARD OF SOCIAL WORK

Guidance on Technology-Assisted Therapy and the Use of Social Media

BACKGROUND

Social workers are currently engaged in a variety of online contact methods with clients. The use of social media, telecommunication therapy and other electronic communication is increasing exponentially with growing numbers of social media outlets, platforms and applications, including blogs, social networking sites, video sites, and online chat rooms and forums. Some social workers often use electronic media both personally and professionally.

Social media and technology-assisted therapy can benefit health care in a variety of ways, including fostering professional connections, promoting timely communication with clients and family members, and educating and informing consumers and health care professionals.

Social workers are increasingly using blogs, forums and social networking sites to share workplace experiences particularly events that have been challenging or emotionally charged. These outlets provide a venue for the practitioner to express his or her feelings, and reflect or seek support from friends, colleagues, peers or virtually anyone on the Internet. Journaling and reflective practice have been identified as effective tools in health care practice. The Internet provides an alternative media for practitioners to engage in these helpful activities. Without a sense of caution, however, these understandable needs and potential benefits may result in the practitioner disclosing too much information and violating client privacy and confidentiality.

This document is intended to provide guidance to practitioners using electronic therapy or media in a manner that maintains client privacy and confidentiality. The protection of the public health, safety, and welfare and the best interest of the public shall be the primary guide in determining the appropriate professional conduct of all persons whose activities are regulated by the board. ***Therefore, the standards of practice set forth in section 18VAC140-20-150 of the regulations and in the Code of Virginia apply regardless of the method of delivery.***

RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE BOARD

The Board of Social Work recommends the following when a licensee uses technology-assisted services as the delivery method:

- *A Social worker providing services to a client located in Virginia through technology-assisted therapy must be licensed by the Virginia Board of Social Work.*
- *The service is deemed to take place where the client is located.* Therefore, the social worker should make every effort to verify the client's geographic location.
- Social workers shall strive to become and remain knowledgeable about the dynamics of online relationships, the advantages and drawbacks of non-face-to-face interactions, and the ways in which technology-assisted social work practice can be safely and

appropriately conducted. Traditional, face-to-face, in-person contact remains the preferred service delivery modality.

- *The social worker must take steps to ensure* client confidentiality and the security of client information in accordance with state and federal law.
- The social worker *should seek training or otherwise demonstrate* expertise in the use of technology-assisted devices, especially in the matter of protecting confidentiality and the security of client information.
- *When working with a client who is not in Virginia*, social workers are advised to check the regulations of the state board in which the client is located. It is important to be mindful that certain states prohibit social work services to a client in the state by an individual who is unlicensed by that state.
- Social workers must follow the same code of ethics for technology-assisted therapy as they do in a traditional social work setting.

ETHICS AND VALUES

Social workers providing technology-assisted therapy shall act ethically, ensure professional competence, protect client confidentiality, and uphold the values of the profession.

TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES

Social workers shall be responsible for becoming proficient in the technological skills and tools required for competent and ethical practice and for seeking appropriate training and consultation to stay current with emerging technologies.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

Social workers shall protect client privacy when using technology in their practice and document all services, taking special safeguards to protect client information in the electronic record.

During the initial session, social workers should provide clients with information on the use of technology in service delivery. Social workers should assure that the client has received notice of privacy practices and should obtain any authorization for information disclosure and consent for treatment or services, as documented in the client record. Social workers should be aware of privacy risks involved when using wireless devices and other future technological innovations and take proper steps to protect client privacy.

Social workers should adhere to the privacy and security standards of applicable federal and state laws when performing services with the use of technology.

Social workers should give special attention to documenting services performed via the Internet and other technologies. They should be familiar with applicable laws that may dictate documentation standards in addition to licensure boards, third-party payers, and accreditation bodies. All practice activities should be documented and maintained in a safe, secure file with safeguards for electronic records.

BOARD OF SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS

Instances of inappropriate use of social/electronic media or technology-assisted therapy may be reported to the Board, and it may investigate such reports, including reports of inappropriate disclosures on social media by a social worker, on the grounds of:

- Unprofessional conduct;
- Unethical conduct;
- Moral turpitude;
- Mismanagement of client records;
- Revealing a privileged communication; and
- Breach of confidentiality.

If the allegations are found to be true, the social worker may face disciplinary action by the Board, including a reprimand or sanction, assessment of a monetary fine, or temporary or permanent loss of licensure, certification, or registration.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Social networks and the Internet provide unparalleled opportunities for rapid knowledge exchange and dissemination among many people, but this exchange does not come without risk. Social workers and students have an obligation to understand the nature, benefits, and consequences of participating in social networking or providing technology-assisted therapy of all types. Online content and behavior has the potential to enhance or undermine not only the individual practitioner's career, but also the profession.

HOW TO AVOID PROBLEMS USING SOCIAL MEDIA

It is important to recognize that instances of inappropriate use of social media can and do occur, but with awareness and caution, social workers can avoid inadvertently disclosing confidential or private information about clients.

The following guidelines are intended to minimize the risks of using social media:

- Recognize the ethical and legal obligations to maintain client privacy and confidentiality at all times.
- Client-identifying information transmitted electronically should be done in accordance with established policies and state and federal law.
- Do not share, post, or otherwise disseminate any information, including images, about a client or information gained in the practitioner-client relationship with anyone unless permitted or required by applicable law.
- Do not identify clients by name or post or publish information that may lead to the identification of a client. Limiting access to postings through privacy settings is not sufficient to ensure privacy.
- Do not refer to clients in a disparaging manner, or otherwise degrade or embarrass the client, even if the client is not identified.

- Do not take photos or videos of clients on personal devices, including cell phones. Follow employer policies for taking photographs or video of clients for treatment or other legitimate purposes using employer-provided devices.
- Maintain professional boundaries in the use of electronic media. Like in-person relationships, the practitioner has the obligation to establish, communicate and enforce professional boundaries with clients in the online environment. Use caution when having online social contact with clients or former clients. Online contact with clients or former clients blurs the distinction between a professional and personal relationship. The fact that a client may initiate contact with the practitioner does not permit the practitioner to engage in a personal relationship with the client.
- Consult employer policies or an appropriate leader within the organization for guidance regarding work related postings.
- Promptly report any identified breach of confidentiality or privacy in accordance with state and federal laws.

CONCLUSION

Social/ electronic media and technology-assisted therapy possess tremendous potential for strengthening professional relationships and providing valuable information to health care consumers. Social workers need to be aware of the potential ramifications of disclosing client-related information via social media or through technology-assisted therapy. Social workers should be mindful of relevant state and federal laws, professional standards regarding confidentiality, and the application of those standards. Social workers should also ensure the standards of practice set forth in 18 VAC 140-20-150 are met when performing technology-assisted therapy.