

Eastern Michigan University School of Social Work Field Program Social Media and Electronic Communication Policy and Guidelines

The use of social media and other forms of electronic communication are common practice and have created new avenues for connection and accessing information. The NASW's *Code of Ethics* was revised in 2017 to address the use of social media and electronic communication in the professional social work context. In response to these ethical standards, the Field Program has identified the following policies and guidelines that should be adhered to by all EMU MSW and BSW students when enrolled in field placement:

- 1) **Social media contact with agency participants:** Students should not engage in social media contact with current or past agency participants during the field placement experience or after the conclusion of the field placement experience. Standard 1.06 in the *Code of Ethics* states that "social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships;" use of personal social media contact with agency participants is a violation of this standard.
- 2) **Use of online search sites:** The NASW *Code of Ethics* provides the following guidelines regarding conducting an online search of agency participants: "Social workers should obtain client consent before conducting an electronic search on the client. Exceptions may arise when the search is for purposes of protecting the client or other people from serious, foreseeable, and imminent harm, or for other compelling professional reasons" (NASW, 2017). This means that students should not engage in online research using social media or other tools to learn about their agency participants. If any such search is required to ensure safety, students would first discuss this with their field instructor.
- 3) **Electronic communication with agency participants:** Students should ask their field placement site about the policies regarding electronic communications with agency participants in order to learn whether email or texting is an agency sanctioned form of communication. Additionally, if email or texting is an agency sanctioned form of communication, students should only use such communication for professional purposes. Email and texting should not be used for personal communication with agency participants. Students should be aware of the risks to confidentiality and privacy when using such forms of communications and should discuss with their field instructor how they can ensure that agency participants' privacy and confidentiality are protected when using these forms of communication.
- 4) **Social media use and the agency:** Students should be aware that because social media platforms are public, posting information about their field placement site, experience, or its participants is subject to public viewing. Any such posts can pose a threat to confidentiality and privacy. Students should be aware of the privacy settings on their social media sites and also need to be mindful that even with privacy restrictions, there is never a guarantee that agency participants (current and past) as well as agency administrators will not have access to the student's social media sites. Students should learn about the agency's social media use policies. Given the student's unique role in the agency setting as a student intern, it is advisable that students not engage in

personal social media contact with their social work field instructor or any agency employee/staff during the course of the internship in order to preserve appropriate boundaries. This standard may differ for students in macro settings where social media use is often part of the professional communication; in such instances, students are using this type of platform or communication in a professional context rather than a personal context.

In addition to the above guidelines, it is important that students learn about their field placement site's social media and electronic communication policies and adhere to those guidelines. Additionally, students are responsible for the ethical standards as described in the NASW's *Code of Ethics*; the changes to the *Code* that include content specific to electronic communication and social media use are highlighted in yellow:
(<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Highlighted-Revisions-to-the-Code-of-Ethics>)