

NASW

National Association of Social Workers

Massachusetts Chapter

Essential Steps for Ethical Problem-Solving

- 1. DETERMINE whether there is an ethical issue or/and dilemma.** Is there a conflict of values, or rights, or professional responsibilities? (For example, there may be an issue of self-determination of an adolescent versus the well-being of the family.)
- 2. IDENTIFY the key values and principles involved.** What meanings and limitations are typically attached to these competing values? (For example, rarely is confidential information held in absolute secrecy; however, typically decisions about access by third parties to sensitive content should be contracted with clients.)
- 3. RANK the values or ethical principles which - in your professional judgment - are most relevant to the issue or dilemma.** What reasons can you provide for prioritizing one competing value/principle over another? (For example, your client's right to choose a beneficial course of action could bring hardship or harm to others who would be affected.)
- 4. DEVELOP an action plan that is consistent with the ethical priorities that have been determined as central to the dilemma.** Have you conferred with clients and colleagues, as appropriate, about the potential risks and consequences of alternative courses of action? Can you support or justify your action plan with the values/principles on which the plan is based? (For example, have you conferred with all the necessary persons regarding the ethical dimensions of planning for a battered wife's quest to secure secret shelter and the implications for her teen-aged children?)
- 5. IMPLEMENT your plan, utilizing the most appropriate practice skills and competencies.** How will you make use of core social work skills such as sensitive communication, skillful negotiation, and cultural competence? (For example, skillful colleague or supervisory communication and negotiation may enable an impaired colleague to see her/his impact on clients and to take appropriate action.)
- 6. REFLECT on the outcome of this ethical decision-making process.** How would you evaluate the consequences of this process for those involved: Client(s), professional(s), and agency (ies)? (Increasingly, professionals have begun to seek support, further professional training, and consultation through the development of Ethics review Committees or Ethics Consultation processes.)

From discussion by Frederick Reamer & Sr. Ann Patrick Conrad in Professional Choices: Ethics at Work (1995), video available from NASW Press 1-800-227-3590