Ethical standards in social work
Ethical standards in social work have been transformed. Like all other professionals, in recent years, social workers' understanding of ethical issues has matured dramatically. When the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) published its first code of ethics in 1960, the entire set of 14 guidelines fit on one side of one page. The current Code—ratified by the NASW Delegate Assembly in 1996, implemented in 1997, and revised modestly in 1999—comprises 155 ethical standards and six broad ethical principles. In the time between, social workers have developed an enriched grasp of the profession's core values, the ways in which core values sometimes conflict in practice, and ethical dilemmas in the profession. In addition, social workers have become more familiar with patterns of ethical misconduct engaged in by a relatively small portion of the profession's members.

The NASW Code of Ethics, which constitutes a marked change in the profession's understanding of and approach to ethical issues, reflects this remarkable transformation. It embodies what we have learned about ethics throughout social work's history—most of which has emerged since 1980, when the broader field of applied and professional ethics began to burgeon.

This book has several purposes. First, it provides social workers with a detailed overview and discussion of the NASW Code of Ethics. It includes a summary of the evolution of ethical issues in the profession; discussion of the profession's core values, mission, and broad ethical principles; and explanations and illustrations of the profession's more specific ethical standards. My hope is that the material will provide the profession with a useful educational tool for use by both experienced and fledgling practitioners.

In addition, this book should be useful to social workers who seek advice and consultation on ethical issues. Although Ethical Standards in Social Work cannot provide formulaic solutions to all ethical issues and should be supplemented by other literature and resources pertaining to social work and professional ethics, it can provide social workers with an overview of relevant guidelines and issues as they sort their way through ethical thickets.

Ethical Standards in Social Work should also be useful to social workers and others who rely on the NASW Code of Ethics in relation to ethics complaints and lawsuits involving social workers. Members of NASW ethics committees and state licensing boards, and those engaged in litigation involving social workers, will find this book helpful in identifying prevailing ethical standards in the profession.

This edition updates the literature and examines a number of emerging issues in more depth (for example, boundary issues, social workers' use of computer technology and involvement in end-of-life decisions). It also includes a new appendix that provides readers with an opportunity to apply the Code of Ethics to case scenarios. Chapter 1 provides an overview of ethical issues in social work, relevant historical developments, and the purposes and core contents of the NASW Code of Ethics. The remaining chapters focus on the Code's standards pertaining to social workers' ethical responsibilities to clients, to colleagues, in practice settings, as professionals, to the social work profession, and to the broader society. The chapters on ethical standards provide a summary and analysis of key ethical issues, often including case examples.

During the years that I have paid serious attention to ethical issues in social work, beginning especially in the mid-1970s, I have been amazed by the exponential growth of interest in the subject among social workers. The reasons for this growth are complex, and they are both reassuring and distressing (see chapter 1). The net result, however, is that contemporary social workers have a better understanding of ethical issues in the profession than did any preceding generation, and that is good. Although I have learned a great deal over the years about these issues, I do not claim to have definitive answers to all ethical quandaries. My hope is that the commentary and analysis in this book will provide readers with thoughtful and thought-provoking guidance as they wrestle with difficult ethical questions and issues. (The views and opinions expressed in this book are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the NASW Code of Ethics Revision Committee or NASW.)

Serving as chair of the NASW Code of Ethics Revision Committee that drafted the code discussed in this book was a genuine privilege. I will always count my work with the esteemed committee members—Carol Brill, Jacqueline Glover, Marjorie Hammock, Vincentia Joseph, Alfred Murillo, Jr., Barbara Varley, and Drayton Vincent—and our principal staff person at NASW, Elizabeth DuMez—among my most treasured professional experiences. This extraordinary group of people spent two years of their professional lives crafting and refining the Code. I was awed by and will always appreciate their exceptional dedication, insight, thoughtfulness, and earnestness.

There is no question that the NASW Code of Ethics is a vital component of social work's identity and integrity: The Code serves as a lodestar for this remarkably diverse profession.

—Frederic G. Reamer
Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. "Clients" is used inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. Professional ethics are at the core of social work. The profession has an obligation to articulate its basic values, ethical principles, and ethical standards. The NASW Code of Ethics sets forth these values, principles, and standards to guide social workers' conduct. The Code is relevant to all social workers and social work students, regardless of their professional functions, the settings in which they work, or the populations they serve.