

Spotlight on Prevention

Partnering to Protect People with Special Needs

Professional Boundaries:

The NYS Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs (Justice Center) is committed to supporting and protecting the health, safety and dignity of people with special needs and disabilities. This Spotlight on professional boundaries provides information about professional boundaries and tools to support maintaining professional boundaries in the provision of care.

Establishing and maintaining professional boundaries is fundamental to a safe and therapeutic environment for people receiving services.ⁱ While boundary crossing is clear when acts of an aggressive, sexual or verbally abusive nature occur, other behaviors that may be perceived as “helpful” and “supportive” may also cross professional boundaries and contradict the goals of the care environment.

Relationships between staff and people receiving services are complex. Staff are often relied upon to assist people in their care in many personal areas of their life including activities of daily living, personal development, learning life skills and medical care. Staff may also have access to sensitive and personal information about people receiving services. Training on professional boundaries and ongoing coaching and support can help staff understand the vulnerabilities of people in care, and to effectively manage their care giving relationships for the good of both parties.ⁱⁱ

Establishing agency culture and conditions that promote appropriate workplace boundaries reduces the risk of mistreatment and improves quality of care. Maintaining professional relationships requires being person-centered, self-aware and following professional ethical standards.

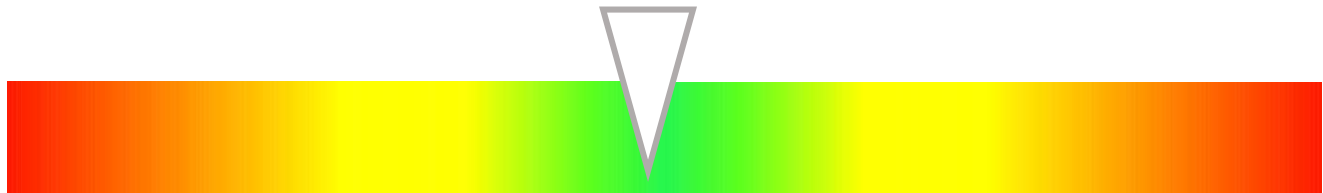
The information provided in this toolkit will help educate people receiving services, self-advocates, direct care providers, agency administrators, friends and family members on the importance of professional boundaries in the provision of care.

Continuum of Professional Behavior:

Staff interactions with people receiving services can be viewed on a continuum.^{iii, iv} Staff can use the continuum below as a guide to help identify when their thoughts, feelings and interactions are within therapeutic and professional parameters. Therapeutic relationships provide opportunities for learning and personal development while maintaining focus on safety, support and respectful interactions.

This continuum provides a frame of reference to evaluate staff interactions with people receiving services and effectiveness in maintaining healthy and supportive boundaries.

Continuum of Professional Behavior



Under Involvement

“In the Zone” Boundaries

Over Involvement

Disconnected from others and the surroundings	Connected to others and mentally present	Over-involved, imposes personal interests & values
Under-reacts to others and situations	Reasonable reaction to others and situations	Over-reacts to others and situations
Lacks warmth, compassion and interest in others	Shows compassion, warmth & interest in others	Overly focused on a select person(s), sexual overtones
Carelessly breaches confidentiality by not attending to agency rules	Aware of and upholds confidentiality requirements	Purposefully breaches confidentiality, disregards the right to privacy
Unaware of treatment plans, does not seek information or clarification when needed	Follows treatment plan, seeks information and clarification as needed	Disregards treatment plan based on personal feelings and reactions
Not present or responsive when needed	Provides flexible support, promotes independence	Undermines independence by doing for, not with
Doesn't provide needed supervision or support	Provides support to co-workers, team focus to ensure needs are met	Over extends self, risking quality and safety
Attends to personal matters on duty and fails to effectively communicate	Communicates clearly, fully and timely manner to ensure care needs are met	Keeps secrets and tells secrets to people receiving services
Lack of awareness of persons' safety and well-being	Invested and aware of persons' safety and well-being	Over protective and smothering or overly-permissive

Professional boundaries help to ensure the following:

- Maintaining the safety of people receiving services and staff.
- Maintaining a therapeutic environment.
- Role modeling and corrective experiences for people receiving services.
- Staff job satisfaction and career development.

When boundary concerns surface, consider the following questions to determine next steps:

- Was the person receiving services harmed or exposed to risk of harm unnecessarily? Did the incident create an unnecessary future risk of harm for the person receiving services?
- What was the staff's intent? Did staff act for an identified therapeutic purpose?
- Was the staff's action in the person's best interest?
- Did the staff's action optimize or detract from care?
- Did the staff consult with a supervisor or colleague as needed?
- Did staff appropriately document the incident?
- Is the agency's training on professional boundaries adequate?
- Is the staff member receiving adequate supervision and support to perform expected duties?
- Is the physical environment conducive to maintaining professional boundaries?
- Did the staff or the person receiving services experience trauma triggers from the incident?
- Does the agency culture encourage and support professional boundaries?

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARY BEST PRACTICES

An agency culture that upholds professional boundaries requires effort to support staff skills and ability in this area. Best practices in this area include:

- Policies and procedures that reinforce professional boundaries in the provision of care, such as procedures for assisting with activities of daily living, staff supervision assignments, community integration, and use of social media.
- Training and ongoing assessment of training and coaching needs on professional boundaries. Staff training should include the following topics:
 - Identifying and avoiding situations where a personal, professional or business relationship poses a risk of boundary issues with the person receiving services.
 - How to maintain professional boundaries with people receiving services who complete treatment but might continue to need services.

- Preparing for each shift, including knowing roles and responsibilities for everyone present.
 - Knowing the care plans, needs and triggers of people receiving services.
 - Use of the agency's crisis management plan and whom to contact for support.
 - Listening and observing, self-awareness, and thoughtful actions in providing services to people receiving services.
- Assessment of how the care setting, needs of the people receiving services, and the nature of therapy may affect professional boundaries.
 - Addressing all staff actions that overstep established boundaries.
 - Supervisory support to help staff effectively manage day to day boundary issues as they arise.
 - Regular debriefing and problem-solving of boundary issues for staff at team and other meetings to prevent these incidents from happening again.
 - Notifying a supervisor or seeking assistance from co-workers when feeling personally challenged with upholding professional boundaries.

RED FLAG BEHAVIORS

Signs of staff actions that breach professional boundaries may be subtle. Early warning signs that raise a “red flag” may include:

- Discussing intimate or personal issues with or in front of a person receiving services.
- Engaging in behaviors that could reasonably be interpreted as flirting.
- Keeping secrets with a person receiving services or for a person receiving services.
- Believing that you are the only one who truly understands, or can help the person receiving services.
- Spending more time than is necessary with a person receiving services.
- Showing favoritism towards a person receiving services.
- Meeting a person receiving services in settings besides those used to provide direct care or when you are not at work.
- Connecting with a person receiving services on social media.
- Speaking negatively about a person receiving services, their family, their staff, significant others or your agency with people receiving services or within their earshot.
- Showing personal dislike or avoidance towards a person receiving services.
- Taking negative or offensive behavior of a person receiving services personally; harboring resentments.
- Joking, sarcasm and horseplay that could be interpreted as hurtful or bullying.

People receiving services may also demonstrate these signs. When this occurs, staff should seek and receive support from supervisors and co-workers to help to address these issues and maintain professional boundaries.

REPORTING MISCONDUCT

Crossing professional boundaries can jeopardize the health and safety of people receiving services and requires swift staff action. These actions may include:

- Consulting with a trusted supervisor or colleague if uncertain about the course of action.
- Alerting supervisory staff.
- Documenting concerns about boundary issues thoroughly and in a timely manner.
- Providing immediate safeguards when necessary.
- Contacting 911 in the event of an emergency or reasonable concern of imminent harm.
- Reporting to the Justice Center when staff actions result in a reportable incident.

Partners in Prevention: What You Can Do

Remember: We all play a role in establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries.

<u>Agencies</u>	<u>Caregivers, Staff</u>	<u>People receiving services, Advocates, Families & Friends</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a mission statement that emphasizes a commitment to a safe and therapeutic environment. • Ensure that informed consent for treatment has been obtained • Provide training to all staff on professional and therapeutic relationships and trauma informed care. • Provide clear policies and direction to all staff on the use of social media at or about work. • Provide training for people in care on professional boundaries. • Set clear expectations that it is always staffs' responsibility to use professional boundaries. • Develop policies and practices to address violations of professional boundaries. <p>Report: Report Abuse or Neglect to the Justice Center</p> <p>24/7 Statewide Toll-Free Hotline Call 1-855-373-2122 TTY 1-855-373-2123</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate that your position includes being a role model by maintaining professional boundaries with co-workers and people in care. • Always remain aware of your profession's code of ethics and the Justice Center Code of Conduct. • Build a strong personal support system that includes professionals, supervisors and others who share your ethical standards of maintaining healthy boundaries. • Attend training on trauma informed care. • Be aware of warning signs of crossing boundaries. • Do not allow personal bias to interfere with a person in care practicing their religion, faith, spiritual and cultural beliefs. <p>Report: Report Abuse or Neglect to the Justice Center</p> <p>24/7 Statewide Toll-Free Hotline Call 1-855-373-2122 TTY 1-855-373-2123</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn the agency's policies and practices on how staff are to develop and sustain professional boundaries. • Participate in programming and treatment to learn how to use healthy boundaries in a variety of situations. • Where possible, request and review agency policies regarding the use of social media and how social media can impact boundaries. • Become educated about personal boundaries regarding your relationships with staff. • Speak up or ask someone to speak for you if you feel someone has crossed your boundaries. <p>Report: Report Abuse or Neglect to the Justice Center</p> <p>24/7 Statewide Toll-Free Hotline Call 1-855-373-2122 TTY 1-855-373-2123</p>



ⁱ Adapted from National Association for Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors (NAADAC) *Personal and Professional Boundaries*, May 2017. Retrieved November 15, 2018 from: https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/2017-05-24_personal_and_professional_boundaries_webinarslides.pdf,

ⁱⁱ Adapted from: National Organization for Human Services Professionals, *Ethical Standards for Human Service Professionals* Retrieved November 15, 2018 from: <http://www.nationalhumanservices.org/ethical-standards-for-hs-professionals>

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from: National Council of State Boards of Nursing, *A Nurses guide to Professional Boundaries*, August, 2018. Retrieved November 15, 2018 from: https://www.ncsbn.org/ProfessionalBoundaries_Complete.pdf

^{iv} Adapted from: Wisconsin Dept. of Health Services and University of Wisconsin Oshkosh CCDET, *Professional Boundaries for Caregivers - Facilitator Guide*, March 2010. Retrieved November, 2018 from: http://www.uwosh.edu/ccdet/caregiver/Documents/Keys/ProfBoundariesCaregivers_FacilitatorGuide.pdf

