

**ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN WORKING
WITH PEOPLE EXPERIENCING
HOMELESSNESS**

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GOALS:

Suggest principles to guide your work.

Provide practical, useful information.

Use real-life examples to encourage discussion, questions, and multiple perspectives.

Ethics are standards of right and wrong that prescribe what we ought to do.

An **ethical dilemma** is a situation that requires a choice between different courses of action. Regardless of which is taken, some ethical principle is compromised. In other words, there is no perfect solution.

REMEMBER:

No one is perfect!

We all have biases & triggers.

We learn from our successes AND mistakes.

Ethics are a process, not a product.

COMMON ETHICAL ISSUES

Interacting/providing help outside of work

Donations, money and things of value

Expressions of gratitude

Favoritism (or not-favoritism!)

When and how to say “no” to a client

Contact/touching

Sexual relationships

Use of drugs/alcohol/medication

Protecting personal information (client & worker)

Manipulation/divisive tactics

MYTHS ABOUT ETHICS

Why worry?!? Everyone who works in human services already holds themselves to high ethical standards.

Being ethical just means using common sense.

Only direct service workers face ethical dilemmas.

Only bad people do unethical things.

Anyone facing an ethical dilemma will ask for help.

If managers don't hear about ethical issues, there must not be any.

FOLLOW YOUR AGENCY'S GUIDANCE

- Mission statement
- Policies and procedures (conflict of interest, gifts, privacy policy, volunteer activities)
- Evidence-based practices
- New employee orientation
- Team meetings/case consultations
- Trainings
- Agency specialist on ethical issues

THINK AHEAD!

Think about ethics
BEFORE
you have a
conflict or dilemma.

Does your action:

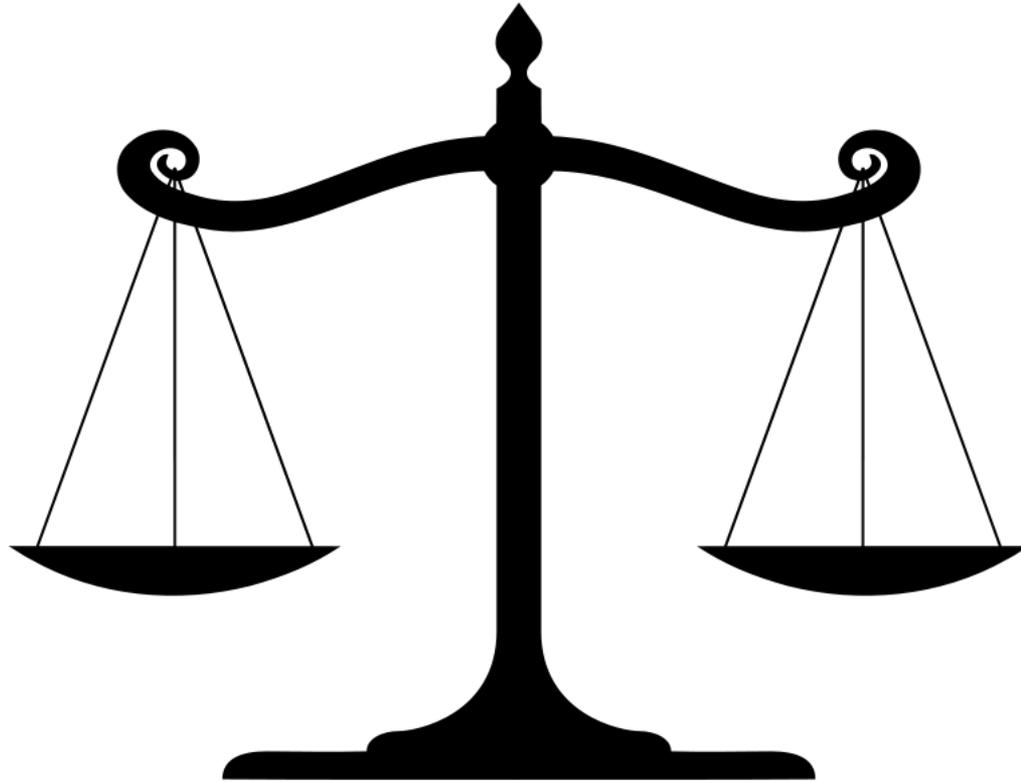
help the client meet their needs

without creating an unacceptable

risk of harm, or impairing your

objectivity or good judgment?

ETHICAL DILEMMAS



SCENARIO 1

You're with your kids at the grocery store when you notice Theresa, a client you know from the shelter, shopping with her children just down the aisle. Do you:

- Quickly leave the store, hoping she doesn't notice.
- Take the initiative to say hi, but don't get into a conversation.
- Ask how things are going, introduce your kids to hers, and ask whether she's going to be at the shelter later.
- Say hi only if she acknowledges you first.

SCENARIO 2

Over the last year, you've gotten to know Kevin well. He has invited you to attend his graduation from tech school. The event is in the evening and you have no other plans. He's invited family members to attend, but doesn't know if anyone will show up. Do you:

- Go no matter what. You're proud of his accomplishment!
- Thank him for the invitation, but go only if others from your agency are attending.
- Politely decline and say you can't socialize with clients.
- Tell Kevin that unfortunately you have other plans.

SCENARIO 3

Tom, who you recently helped move into housing, left an envelope on your desk one morning. Inside is a hand-drawn card that says “Thanks for all you’ve done for me” and a \$20 bill. Do you:

- Return the card and money because you should never accept any kind of gift from a client
- Tell your supervisor that you received this gift.
- Pocket the cash and keep the card.
- Return the cash, explaining that you can’t keep it, but display the card in your team’s office or break room.

SCENARIO 4

It's a cold night and you've given out all but one of the donated hats in the shelter. Lloyd asks if he can have the last one. You gave Lloyd a hat last week and other guests are still coming in. Not everyone has a hat. Do you:

- Tell Lloyd to come back later; if no one takes it, he can have it.
- Give Lloyd the hat – first come, first served.
- Ask other staff if Lloyd should get the hat.
- Tell Lloyd no. He got a hat last week, and there are other people who might still need one.

SCENARIO 5

Doris is very outgoing and friendly. She calls you “sweetie” and greets you with a big hug whenever you see her in the office or do a home visit. She treats your coworkers the same way. Do you:

- Tell Doris that you can never have any physical contact with a client.
- Enjoy the attention. No one ever calls you “sweetie.”
- Don’t worry, everyone knows that Doris is outgoing and affectionate.
- Consult with your supervisor and co-workers to decide, as a team, whether someone needs to talk with Doris about her behavior.

SCENARIO 6

Nick has been in your program for a few months. One day he asks “Do you have five dollars?” He says he needs bus fare to reach work tomorrow, and he’ll pay you back as soon as he gets paid. Without bus fare, he’ll lose his job and then he won’t be able to pay for the apartment he’s moving into next month. Do you:

- Say sorry, you don’t have five dollars.
- Pull out your wallet to see what you might have.
- Ask your supervisor if she has any tokens or petty cash.
- Let other staff know that Nick asked you for money.

SCENARIO 7

Fred has a history of heavy alcohol use. While on a grocery run, you notice that his hands are shaking. In the car, he asks “Could we stop at the liquor store so I can buy a ½ gallon of vodka? I’m real sick, and I’m afraid I’ll fall if I walk there with all this snow and ice.” Your agency endorses harm reduction. Do you:

- Tell him no, you can’t stop at a liquor store.
- Do it just this once, since it is snowy and icy outside.
- Take him to the liquor store. Alcohol is legal, and he’s an adult with his own money to spend.
- Ask if he wants to go to detox or the E.R. instead.

SCENARIO 8

Sarah pulls you aside one day and explains “I’m really trying to change! My case manager just isn’t working hard enough for me. I need someone like you who can give me the help I need.” Do you:

- Redirect her and set up an meeting with your supervisor.
- Tell Sarah that you can’t wait to work with him.
- Share what Sarah told you with the other case manager.
- Tell Sarah that she needs to share her concerns with your supervisor directly.

RESOURCES

Homelessness: Ethics, Professionalism & Boundaries

Jaimie Page, U of TX School of Social Work

<http://www.ahomewithhope.org/media/31043/tarrant-county-ethics-training.pdf>

Ethics for Human Services Staff: Doing the Right Thing Even When No One is Watching – Sandra Eames, Ed.D

<http://www.reentryroundtable.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/EthicsTraining.pdf>

Respecting Boundaries: The Don'ts of Dual Relationships

Claudia Dewane, Social Work Today (Jan/Feb 2010)

<http://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/012610p18.shtml>

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