

**What Social Workers Should Know When Working with People with Disabilities**

The NASW Code of Ethics is designed to be a guide for ethical social work conduct (Workers, 2008). Inferences about the NASW Code of Ethics can put social workers at odds with disability rights and the Independent Living (IL) agenda that the disability community has forwarded over the last 50 years. The IL movement and philosophy was created by people with disabilities and founded on the notion that “people with disabilities, regardless of the form, have a common history and a shared struggle, that we are a community and a culture that will advance further banded together politically,” (“About Independent Living,” 2019). People with disabilities have fought for the right to direct their own lives, but the NASW Code of Ethics seeks to set out parameters for that self-direction. To effectively practice within those parameters, one must know the context of the fight for disability rights and the position of IL Philosophy.

**“Independent Living philosophy emphasizes consumer control, the idea that people with disabilities are the best experts on their own needs, having crucial and valuable perspective to contribute and deserving of equal opportunity to decide how to live, work, and take part in their communities, particularly in reference to services that powerfully affect their day-to-day lives and access to independence.”**

**-National Council on Independent Living (“About Independent Living,” 2019)**

<b>Comparison of IL and inclusion for people with disabilities</b>	
<b>IL and inclusion for people with disabilities mean that consumers have the right to:</b>	<b>IL and inclusion for people with disabilities <u>does not</u> include:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Exercise the greatest degree of choice about where, with whom, and how they live</li> <li>✓ Have the opportunity to participate in all aspects of community life</li> <li>✓ Make decisions that affect their lives</li> <li>✓ Take responsibility for their own actions</li> <li>✓ Control and direct their own life</li> <li>✓ Experience success and consequence as result of choices made</li> <li>✓ Asserting their rights and responsibilities as a first-class citizen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>× Having others take care of all of their needs</li> <li>× Accepting an attitude of learned helplessness</li> <li>× Not being allowed to take risks and make choices</li> <li>× That someone is a patient who needs attention or someone who is defined by a diagnosis</li> <li>× Not having the same access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness</li> </ul>

The Purpose statement of the NASW Code of Ethics acknowledges that there are times when parts of the code may come in conflict with each other, and when those conflicts arise it is the responsibility of the individual to practice ethical decision making. “Ethical decision making in a given situation must apply the informed judgment of the individual social worker and should also consider how the issues would be judged in a peer review process where the ethical standards of the profession would be applied,” (Workers, 2008).

Future advocates for marginalized groups, such as social workers, should familiarize themselves with the IL Philosophy which is widely agreed upon within the disability community. Once an understanding of the IL philosophy is established, it is important to view the NASW Code of Ethics from an IL perspective and note where there are conflicts and alignment. Social workers need to be aware of biases and assumptions about people with disabilities and should place the highest importance on consumers’ rights to self-determination.

References:

“About Independent Living,” (2019). National Council for Independent Living. Retrieved from <https://www.ncil.org/about/aboutil/>  
Workers, N.A., (2008). NASW Code of Ethics (Guide to the Everyday Professional Conduct of Social Workers). Washington, DC: NASW.

**How the NASW Code of Ethics Aligns and Conflicts with IL Philosophy**

NASW Code of Ethics	Aligns with IL/Disability Rights	Conflict with IL Philosophy/Disability Rights
<p><b>Value:</b> Social Justice  <b>Ethical Principle:</b> Social workers challenge social injustice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people</li> <li>● Social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice</li> <li>● Seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity</li> <li>● Strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people (Workers, 2008)</li> </ul>	<p>This concept aligns with the IL Philosophy on several points: challenging social injustice, challenging discrimination, promoting cultural sensitivity, ensuring equality of opportunity and meaningful participation in decision making for <u>all people</u>.</p>	<p>The conflict arises in the statement about pursuing social change “<u>on behalf of vulnerable</u> and oppressed individuals and groups of people.” The IL Philosophy operates on the basis of inclusion, meaning people with disabilities should be involved in any decisions or social justice activities aimed at reducing discrimination for that community. Any assumption about the inherent vulnerability of an individual or a population does not align with the IL Philosophy.</p>
<p><b>Value:</b> <i>Dignity and Worth of the Person</i>  <b>Ethical Principle:</b> <i>Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Promote clients’ socially responsible self-determination</li> <li>● Seek to enhance clients’ capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs</li> <li>● Cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society</li> <li>● Seek to resolve conflicts between clients’ interests and the broader society’s interests in a socially responsible manner consistent with the values, ethical principles, and ethical standards of the profession (Workers, 2008)</li> </ul>	<p>This concept aligns with IL Philosophy because of the assumption of the dignity and worth of every individual, as well as their right to self-determination and enhancing clients’ capacity to address their own needs.</p>	<p>The conflict in this statement arises when social workers are responsible for determining the <u>social responsibility</u> of each individual’s self-determination. When/How is someone’s right to self-determination really a threat to society? Who is qualified to make that call?</p>
<p><b>Ethical Standard 1.02 Self-Determination</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals</li> <li>● May limit clients’ right to self-determination when, in the social workers’ professional judgment, clients’ actions or potential actions pose a serious, foreseeable, and imminent risk to themselves or others (Workers, 2008)</li> </ul>	<p>Again, self-determination and self-direction are concepts that align with the IL Philosophy. Helping clients to identify and clarify their own goals is also in alignment.</p>	<p>Social workers’ discretion when it comes to limiting self-determination or the rights of a client can be a slippery slope. Decisions based on inherent biases may cause social workers to interpret risks or vulnerabilities <u>on behalf</u> of the client and make decisions <u>for</u> the client that are not in the client’s best interest.</p>
<p><b>Ethical Standard 1.05 Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures</li> <li>● Obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, and mental or physical ability (Workers, 2008)</li> </ul>	<p>Disability transcends every social group. Membership in any group does not disqualify a person from having or acquiring a disability. Disability culture, disability rights, and disability pride are all essential topics for an inclusive, culturally competent education.</p>	<p>On basic premise, this standard does not conflict with the IL Philosophy. However, disability culture, disability rights, and disability pride are not topics that get a lot of coverage in most social work programs. (If these topics were included in social work education, this standard would align with the IL philosophy.)</p>