

It is also not a good idea to date staff members within the agency as long as you are a student there. When there are breakups, relationships have a way of causing hard feelings. Former soulmates can turn vindictive or uncooperative. Even if the relationship doesn't turn sour, you might not be able to maximize your learning in an agency where your relationship becomes a prime topic of conversation and office relationships are extremely difficult to keep secret. Finally, the NASW Code of Ethics (1999) states:

Social workers who function as supervisors or educators should not engage in sexual activities or contact with supervisees, students, trainees, or other colleagues over whom they exercise professional authority.

WHAT DO I DO IF I OBSERVE SOMETHING ILLEGAL OR UNETHICAL?

It is possible that you will observe or overhear something in an agency that strikes you as illegal or unethical. Consider this example: A student intern observes an employee apparently stealing an assortment of office supplies. Should the student report this to her field instructor? Probably not. The employee may be working at home on agency-related work and plans on bringing the unused materials back to the office the next morning. It is not the student's role to police other employees.

However, if you were to observe someone in the agency misappropriating client funds, fondling a client, or snorting drugs, then you would have a responsibility to report these much more serious accusations to your field instructor. The NASW Code of Ethics (1999) requires social workers who have a direct knowledge of a social work colleague's impairment due to personal problems, substance abuse, or mental difficulties to take action through appropriate channels.

Sometimes it is very difficult to know whether some action should be reported. One student was told not to use the agency phone for personal calls, yet observed a staff member who tied up a phone line for 45 minutes on a call to her boyfriend. This was not fair, and the student wanted to complain to her field instructor. In fact, she did complain. The field instructor took no action. The staff member was a personal friend of the field instructor, and there was no disciplinary action. But the student was viewed as a malcontent who was always complaining. Her final evaluation was much lower than her midterm evaluation.

The best advice is to consider the seriousness of the offense or charge: Is someone harmed or likely to be harmed? Contemplate what the consequences would be if you are wrong. What if you were mistaken and the 45-minute call was not to a boyfriend but to a legitimate client who was falling apart and needed 45 minutes of the social worker's time? If you are sure that you are right and the charge is serious enough to be unethical, illegal, or unprofessional, discuss the incident in private with your field instructor or your faculty field liaison, and the two of you can decide what the next step should be.

Case Example

For your first practicum you are assigned to a residential facility for persons with developmental disabilities and mental retardation. After the second week, a friend stops by, and since you are not busy at the time, you take about 15 minutes to give your friend a

tour of the facility. Later, the agency director makes it clear that you are not to invite friends and family members to the facility. You explain that you had not invited your friend; she had just shown up, and you were merely being polite. Your feelings are a little hurt.

The next weekend, the interior of the facility is being painted and all but about four clients go home for a visit. Jim, a long-time employee of the facility, has a visit from his girlfriend on Saturday afternoon. They go into the office and keep the door closed for about two hours. During this time Jim does not answer the phone or attend to any agency business that you can observe.

Questions

1. Should you inform your agency supervisor of Jim's activities?
2. Should you let Jim know that you felt that he was violating the rules?
3. Should you cover for Jim?

HOW DO I HANDLE AGENCY SECRETS?

Once in a while students learn of transactions or behaviors within an agency that are not common knowledge. For instance, the treasurer may have been accused of embezzling a sum of money or the director may have been sued for palimony. Because the agency is not your client, you are not obligated to keep this information confidential in the same way as you have to safeguard sensitive material that clients share with you. However, you would be well advised to be very discreet in revealing these agency secrets.

For one thing, the allegations could turn out to be completely false and the result of vicious rumor. It would be embarrassing (if not irresponsible) if you were to spread such gossip throughout the community. Could you be guilty of slander in this situation? Furthermore, the personal affairs of agency officials may not interfere with their administrative abilities within the agency. Airing an agency's secrets in public could contribute to the agency's loss of reputation in the community and do a disservice to the many fine, hard working, and unselfish staff members.

If you feel that the private information that you have about the agency has or could have a direct effect on the quality of services to clients or the learning in your practicum, report this information to either your field instructor or your faculty field liaison. Also report this information if you think it might prevent future students from being placed in the agency. Otherwise, whom you tell about the agency's secrets depends on your own discretion.

HOW DO I HANDLE SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Sexual harassment is unwanted verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. This harassment includes compliments of a very personal or sexual nature; pressure for dates or sexual contact; jokes with suggestive themes; unwelcome notes; or physical activities such as touching, brushing against, unsolicited back rubs; or blocking passage with one's body. The few studies available on sexual harassment of social workers have shown that human service agencies are not immune from this problem and that almost 30 percent of social workers have experienced some form of sexual harassment.