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Love thy God – Love thy Neighbor: Responsibility to Clients Is Grounded in This Gospel Message

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“Love thy God – Love thy Neighbor”

Responsibility to Clients Is Grounded in This Gospel Message

By Dr. Barbara W. Shank

The *Catholic Charities USA Code of Ethics* sets forth broad ethical principles that reflect Catholic Charities core values and establishes a set of ethical standards that should guide practice and ethical decision-making in Catholic Charities agencies. These ethical standards apply to responsibility to clients and agency activities of governance boards, executives, management teams, staff, volunteers, funders, investments, and research.

The ethical standards outlined in the Code flow from the principles of Catholic social teaching and the fundamental values held by Catholic Charities. As the Gospel tells us that the greatest commandment is to love our God, with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength (Mark 12:30), it also tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). For staff, “loving our neighbor” is the foundation of the first ethical standard outlined in the Code, responsibility to clients.

Review of the literature on ethical standards and codes of ethics support the twenty responsibilities identified as concern for the client. Although other segments of the Code affect staff relationships to other constituencies, the segment on responsibilities to clients is primary and the most comprehensive.

Responsibilities to Clients – Responsibilities of Staff

The ethical principles of responsibility to clients are closely tied to those identified as responsibility of staff members. The effect of the staff’s ethics on their clients, rather than the implication of their behavior for clients in general or prospective clients, is the concern. Responsibility to clients centers on respect of and belief in the inherent dignity of each person. Staff members are ethically accountable not only for what they do in their relationship with their clients, but for what they do not do that their relationship gives them the opportunity and responsibility to do. They are expected to treat clients with empathy, consideration, respect, and honesty and are obliged to provide competent, reasonable, appropriate, and culturally sensitive services. They must respect the religious beliefs, values, and identities of all clients and must not proselytize. Staff members must maintain objectivity towards clients, respecting their autonomy and enabling them to make their own decisions to the maximum extent the situation and their competence allows, within the law and agency policy. When the needs of the client are not best served through Catholic Charities, a referral to another provider, consistent with the mission of Catholic Charities is required. Staff members are expected to provide services consistent with best practices for the needed service and within the scope of their education and expertise. They should know what they are capable of and what they are not capable of and then make a decision about service that is in the best interest of the client. The principle of “do no harm”—encompassing issues of accountability, competence, loyalty, and confidentiality—must guide the behavior of all staff. Quite simply, responsibility to clients boils down to two core values: service and justice.

Service

Addressing the presenting and assessed needs of clients is the purpose of service and our responsibility to clients. Staff members are expected to avoid conflicts of interest and dual

relationships, which can interfere with both the staff member and client's capacity to make appropriate decisions and exercise judgment. This principle is the basis for prohibiting service to friends and family. Staff members are also prohibited from engaging in sexual harassment and having sexual contact with clients, as this conduct is clearly a breach of ethical principles. Maintaining one's objectivity is threatened when there is a conflict of interest or emotional involvement with the client. Client care and delivery of services are compromised when objectivity is minimized or abandoned. Over-identification by staff with a particular philosophy or treatment modality can deprive the client of the benefits of another modality or regime of service.

Informed consent is both an ethical principle and a critical practice activity addressed by the Code. Staff members provide access to services and suggest alternatives so clients have a basis for decision-making that is consistent with their interests and values. Clients must be informed not only about the reason for service, but the probability of a successful outcome, the risks involved, other reasonable alternative services, and mandated reporting requirements. Informed consent demonstrates honesty and candor, helping the client to realistically appraise the situation and the consequences of engaging in service.

Although staff can rarely guarantee absolute confidentiality, they must safeguard the client's right to confidentiality and to privacy. More often than not, clients reveal sensitive information that could be damaging to the client if it is inappropriately revealed. As long as the information emerges from the service provided, whether relevant to the service or not, it must not be shared, unless required by law or unless it can be shown that the well being of the client or others is in jeopardy.

Expectations for ethical behavior apply not only to staff behavior, but also to agency activities. Catholic Charities agencies are responsible for setting fees for service that are fair, reasonable, and appropriate, and that consider the client's ability to pay. Staff members are expected to terminate services when they are no longer needed or can't be properly provided.

Justice

Responsibility to the client includes the obligation to try to improve the quality of life for all people, to work for the rights of others, and to bring about the common good. Catholic Charities affirms the social justice mandate that each client have the opportunity to develop their unique potential and, therefore, make their maximum contribution to society. Catholic Charities advocates for clients and for social structures that are responsive to the needs and conditions of all. Seeking justice for all means working to change structures that violate human dignity.

Discrimination, a violation of human dignity, is a significant issue faced by many clients, often the most vulnerable members of society. These persons—typically children, women, older adults, persons of color, and the disabled—are victims of institutional discrimination. Responsibility to clients mandates that Catholic Charities agencies and staff not discriminate against individuals served or refuse services to anyone on the basis of race, color, creed, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or nationality.

Responsibility to clients calls us to work to achieve greater justice for all through social policy advocacy efforts that reduce poverty and racism and ensure adequate housing, education, and health care. It further calls us to engage in social action for equal access to resources, services, and employment for clients. The work of social change and the promotion of social justice require the commitment of staff and volunteers in partnership with local church communities and coalitions of like-minded persons and groups to achieve solutions to our social problems.

Recognizing and Addressing Conflicts

The Code recognizes the possibility of conflicts between the personal and professional values of staff members and agency policies, relevant laws or regulations, or sections of the Code's principles, values, and standards. When such conflicts occur, staff members must make a responsible effort to resolve the conflict in a manner that is consistent with the values, principles, and standards expressed in the Code. If a reasonable resolution of the conflict does not appear possible, staff should seek proper consultation before making a decision that might negatively impact the client or the agency.

Over the years, we've learned how important it is for Catholic Charities agencies and staff to have a code of ethics to guide practice and help resolve ethical dilemmas. The *Catholic Charities USA Code of Ethics* continues and supports the tradition of attention to mission and Catholic identity, helps agencies and staff practice the mission, and answer the call to be "doers of the word" (James 1:22).

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