



Professional Practice Guidelines: Independent Practice for Personal Support Workers (PSWs) (2026)

Purpose

These Professional Practice Guidelines establish clear expectations, responsibilities, and professional requirements for Personal Support Workers (PSWs) who practice independently (self-employed, private contractors, or sole practitioners). They are designed to protect the public, support professional accountability, and ensure safe, ethical, and competent care delivery in non-employer-led settings.

Scope

These guidelines apply to PSWs providing care outside of direct employer supervision, including but not limited to:

- Private home care
- Community-based support
- Independent living support
- Self-directed care arrangements
- Contracted or freelance PSW services

These guidelines do not replace employer policies when a PSW is employed by an agency or organization.

Definition: Independent Practice

Independent practice refers to situations where a PSW:

- Is self-employed or contracted
- Sets their own schedule and fees
- Works without direct on-site clinical supervision
- Is directly accountable to the client and/or substitute decision-maker
- Is responsible for their own compliance, documentation, and professional safeguards



Professional Accountability

PSWs practicing independently are fully accountable for:

- Adhering to all Professional Practice Guidelines for PSWs
- Practicing within their scope, education, and competence
- Maintaining professional boundaries and ethical conduct
- Ensuring client safety at all times

Independent PSWs must recognize that greater autonomy requires greater accountability.

Competence & Scope of Practice

1. PSWs Must:

- Provide only services they are educated, trained, and competent to perform
- Decline tasks that require delegation by a Regulated Health Professional (RHP) unless such delegation is formally obtained and documented

2. PSWs Must Not:

- Perform controlled acts
 - Diagnose, assess, or prescribe
 - Represent themselves as regulated health professionals
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Client Assessment & Care Planning

Independent PSWs must:

- Review available care plans, service agreements, or client instructions
- Clarify expectations, limitations, and responsibilities before accepting care
- Identify risks and escalate concerns appropriately

PSWs must refer clients to appropriate regulated professionals when care needs exceed PSW scope.



Informed Consent

PSWs must obtain informed consent for all services provided.

Consent must be:

- Voluntary
- Informed
- Ongoing
- Documented when appropriate

When a substitute decision-maker is involved, legal authority must be verified.

Documentation & Record Keeping

Independent PSWs are responsible for maintaining accurate and secure records, including:

- Dates and times of service
- Tasks performed
- Observations and concerns
- Client refusals or changes in condition
- Incidents or near misses

Records must be:

- Confidential
 - Stored securely
 - Retained according to best practice and legal guidance
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Privacy & Confidentiality

PSWs must:

- Comply with applicable privacy legislation (for example, PHIPA in Ontario)
- Protect personal and health information
- Share information only on a need-to-know basis
- Secure electronic and paper records

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Professional Boundaries

Independent PSWs must:

- Maintain clear professional boundaries at all times
- Avoid dual relationships that may impair judgment
- Not exploit clients financially, emotionally, or socially
- Decline gifts, loans, or personal benefits that could influence care

Risk Management & Safety

Independent PSWs must:

- Conduct personal safety and environmental risk assessments
- Follow infection prevention and control practices
- Have an emergency response plan
- Report abuse, neglect, or unsafe conditions as required by law

Insurance & Liability

PSWs practicing independently must carry active professional liability insurance appropriate to their scope of services. Failure to maintain coverage places both the PSW and the public at risk.

Business & Ethical Conduct

Independent PSWs must:

- Advertise services honestly and accurately
- Use clear service agreements or contracts
- Set transparent fees
- Avoid misleading titles or credentials
- Not guarantee outcomes beyond PSW scope



Collaboration & Referral

PSWs must:

- Collaborate respectfully with families, caregivers, and professionals
- Refer clients to regulated professionals when care needs change
- Accept guidance from RHPs when involved in shared care arrangements

Continuing Education

Independent PSWs are responsible for maintaining competence through:

- Ongoing education and training
- Skill refreshers
- Awareness of updated guidelines and best practices

Professional Representation

PSWs practicing independently are encouraged to:

- Maintain membership with professional associations such as OPSWA and CANSWA
- Use recognized professional titles appropriately
- Uphold the reputation of the PSW profession

Non-Compliance

Failure to follow these Professional Practice Guidelines may result in:

- Termination of service agreements
- Loss of professional association membership
- Legal or civil consequences
- Increased liability exposure

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Review Cycle

These Professional Practice Guidelines are effective January 1, 2026, and will be reviewed every three years or sooner if legislative or practice changes occur.

Resources – Independent Practice for PSWs (2026)

- Ontario Personal Support Workers Association (OPSWA): Independent PSW guidance and professional accountability resources
- Canadian Support Workers Association (CANSWA): National best practices and ethical practice frameworks
- Regulated Health Professions Act (RHPA), Ontario
- Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA), Ontario
- Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), Ontario
- Public Health Ontario – Infection Prevention & Control (IPAC) Guidelines