

Loss Control Bulletin

A significant part of counseling work performed by social workers takes place in unfamiliar surroundings, usually the homes of an individual or family receiving counseling services. During the initial visit very little, if anything, is known about real and potential risk factors that might endanger a social worker while on the premises. Assuring the personal safety of a social worker involves researching each case carefully and developing a safety plan that addresses the known facts of the specific case and provides strategies for events and situations commonly encountered during a home visit.

It is important for a social worker to attain a degree of personal safety if he or she is to be able to focus on providing the counseling services needed by the client. This bulletin addresses some steps that can be taken throughout the stages of case management that will help protect the social worker.

Preparation

Prior to making an initial visit on a new case, it is essential to prepare **a case specific** personal risk assessment. Assessing the situation begins with a review of information available about the case. Start by ensuring the file is complete and includes:

- all previous case management reports, police incident reports,
- any violence reports associated with any household residents and their known visitors,
- any prior negative encounters between household residents and coworkers or other persons or agencies (schools, police),
- any history of mental illness within the family,
- any use or ownership of firearms by any of household members.

Consult your co-workers, police contacts, and other credible sources that have personal knowledge regarding the case, neighborhood, nearby gang activity, or illegal activities of household members.

When assessing the neighborhood, you will need to visit and take into consideration whether:

- this is a high crime area for personal property and/or violence,
- the area is known or suspected to be frequented by drug dealers or users, the area is known or suspected to have gang activity,
- the area is well lit and frequently patrolled by police,
- co-workers have experienced problems working in the area, there may be cults or other groups recruiting in the area.

Plan for your safety

Although your personal safety plan will contain some universal elements, the plan should address the facts of the specific case and consider the need for the following precautions:

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- whether your visit should be made with a police officer or with a co-worker,
- whether your visit should be made only during daytime hours or other safe time of day,
- whether your visit should be coordinated to avoid the presence of a member of the household,
- whether you should request to be escorted into and out of the client's residence building,
- make sure your supervisor or co-workers know where you are going, your appointment time, and when you expect to end your appointment or return to the office,
- make sure your vehicle is in good operating condition and has sufficient gas at all times,
- carry a charged cell phone at all times,
- perform a drive-by of the premises prior to entering the building, make sure that a safe and well lit
- parking area is available close to the building occupied by your client(s), when parking in a building, it is preferable that there be two exits available to use,
- consult any written guidelines established by the agency you work for,
- before knocking to enter, listen for yelling, screaming, or other signs of fighting,
- when knocking to enter, stand clear of the door, clearly identify yourself and explain the purpose of your visit,
- when you enter the client's residence, stay close to the door, don't let a person get between you and the door until you have assessed your personal safety, as soon as you enter the client's premises, note location of doors and identify at least two escape routes, and if possible make sure the door remains unlocked, terminate the visit immediately if there are firearms or armed individuals on the premises, consider whether you should terminate the visit if drug paraphernalia or other items that could be used as weapons are present, quickly assess the state of mind of those present in the premises,
- know how to identify potentially dangerous individuals, recognize signs of aggressive or threatening behavior exhibited by any individual present,
- trust your instincts and leave if you feel you are in danger,
- remain observant at all times and note changes in the situation that warrant a change in your course of action,
- consider using a safety agreement with all household members who are or could be present during home visits.

Safety agreement

In some situations, it may be helpful to get all participants to agree to follow certain rules of interactions during counseling sessions. Establish ground rules that require all participants to agree to always behave in non-violent non-threatening ways toward any participants during the counseling sessions. The signed agreement provides an opportunity for discussion of a safety concern that participants normally have in such circumstances.

In case of aggression

Anger can quickly turn physical aggression. If a person tried to strike you, protect yourself and immediately leave the room and call 911 as soon as it is safe for you to do so. If you are unable to escape, use appropriate defensive techniques listed below:

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- protect your head from blows using your hands, arms, clipboard, pillow, etc.
- if on the ground, use your feet and legs to block blows
- if grabbed by the arm, quickly twist away in the direction of the person's thumb to break the hold
- if bitten, push forward against the bite, this force should release the bite.
- If you are being choked, raise up both arms straight up, turn quickly to break the hold
- If your hair is pulled, use your hands to press down on your attacker's hand to break the hold
- don't reach for a weapon, instead try to get the person to talk to you.

Summary

Social workers typically work with individuals and families during crisis, frequently where normal communications have broken down. Individuals may be at or near the point of losing control over the situation they face. For the social worker to be able to assist a client, it is essential that an atmosphere of calm and control be established and maintained. Developing and following a well thought out safety plan can help assure the safety of all participants involved while providing needed services and support to the individuals or family.