Staying Safe When Working with Clients

The suggestions listed here for maintaining staff safety are just that, suggestions. They will not guarantee your safety. They are intended to provide a framework for considering several factors, which potentially could impact upon your safety in the office and community.

In General

* Keep client addresses updated in Caseworthy so that we have accurate information in the event of an emergency.
* Always carry your county identification card.
* Keep in mind that any client can be a safety concern under the right circumstances. Don’t let your guard down just because you’re familiar with a person.
* Before your appointment with a new client, review the information available to you in the file for any reason to be cautious with the client. There is no absolute way to predict a person will be violent but common contributing factors include:
  + Gender – in general, males are more prone to aggression
  + IQ – in general, individuals with lower IQ are more prone to aggression because they may misunderstand situations, have more difficulty processing, and have fewer coping skills
  + Intoxication – individuals under the influence of alcohol or other drugs are less inhibited to act aggressively
  + History of past aggressive behavior – age behavior started, in what settings, who were victims, what type
  + Current major mental illness or personality disorder
  + History of past traumatic experiences – can lead people to be hypervigilant and/or feel unsafe
  + Recent problems with instability such as loss of job, divorce, death, removal of children, legal charges, homelessness, etc.
* Inform others if you are about to meet with a potentially violent client.
* Invite a co-worker to join you for the appointment if you are feeling uncomfortable or discussing potentially upsetting topics.
* Trust your instincts. If it doesn’t feel right, you can always reschedule.
* Dress professionally but functionally. Wear clothing that allows you to move freely and shoes you can run in.
* Respect the person’s personal space by staying 1.5 to 3 feet away from them. If you must enter their personal space, explain what you’re doing and do so slowly.
* Be aware of the tone, volume, and cadence of your speech. How you say things can give a different meaning to what you say.
* Allow silence and time enough for the person to respond to your statements or questions. Some people may take longer to process the information.
* Don’t challenge or argue with the person but be confident. Be empathetic and non-judgmental. Try to understand how the person is feeling and offer reassurance instead of trying to correct misperceptions. What they are feeling is real to them. Instead of saying “no one is trying to hurt you,” you might say “it sounds like you’re frightened.
* Control your breathing and stay calm. As the person escalates, you should speak more slowly and quietly.
* Maintain eye contact but don’t look directly in their eyes. Look toward the cheek area.
* Don’t reveal too much personal information about yourself or your family. Also be careful what you post on your social media accounts.
* Use only your desk phone or county issued cell phone to make work related calls to prevent identification of personal phones with caller ID.
* Maintain a self-confident, self-assured posture and attitude.
* Document any danger, threats, uncomfortable situations, etc., that occur. Discuss the incident with your supervisor and determine if the incident needs to be reported elsewhere or a safety plan put in place for future meetings.

In the Office

* Do not leave personal property out in open view. Lock it away.
* Arrange office furniture for space between you and the client and giving you the ability to exit the office.
* Be aware of the location of potential weapons (e.g. lamps, computers, nameplates, staplers, tape dispensers, scissors, letter openers, excess pens and pencils, chairs, other heavy objects)
* Be aware of where exits are located and rooms which could be locked.
* Place your phone where you have easy access.
* There is an Emergency button outside of Dawn’s office.
* There is a portable Alarm button that is kept in the top right-hand drawer of Teresa’s desk. Staff should consider taking the Alarm button into session if there is concern that a client could potentially become violent.
* Be aware of the presence or lack of other staff in the office. Appointments with potentially volatile clients should not be held when you are alone in the office.
* Escort customers, vendors, and strangers. Do not allow them to roam unattended and do not walk in front of them.
* Never prevent a client from leaving your office.
* If you hear noise from a room indicating escalation that could lead to violence, ask your colleague to come out for a consultation, or say there is a long-distance call on another phone. This will allow time for an assessment of a potentially serious situation.

In the Community

Before the Visit:

* Call ahead to make sure the family is home and will be there to answer the door when you arrive.
* Make sure you have the correct address, phone number and clear driving directions along with the appointment time.
* Make sure you let your supervisor or co-workers know where you are and when you will be back or plan to notify staff when your visit has concluded for the day.
* Gather as much information as possible about the site and the people you are visiting.
* If possible, make the visit during daylight hours.
* Before your visit, ask questions about pets, children, other potential visitors etc.
* Don’t wear a lot of jewelry.
* Carry your cell phone with you but keep it in your pocket on silent during the visit.

Traveling to/from the Visit:

* Know where you’re going, review directions before you leave the office.
* Schedule visits to avoid leaving a residence after dark.
* Look in the backseat before getting in your car.
* Keep your car in good working condition. Make sure your gas tank has plenty of fuel. Know how to change a tire and have a spare available. Have a first aid kit and flashlight in your car. Have phone numbers of who to call if you need roadside assistance.
* Keep valuables out of sight.Carry as little as possible. It’s best to put valuables in the trunk before you leave on an appointment so as not to advertise what you have and where you put it.
* Never stop if someone tries to stop you or asks you to pull over. Proceed to nearest business, police, or fire station for help.
* Park on the street rather than in a driveway or an alley. Park in the direction you want to go when you leave the home visit.
* If you must park in a driveway, back in so you can simply drive out.
* Park in well lit areas and as close to your destination as possible.
* Avoid parking close to visual obstructions such as bushes, large vehicles, dumpsters, or other objects which prevent you from scanning the area around your car.
* Walk confidently and with purpose to your destination.
* Carry as little as possible into the home and try to keep hands free. Take only what is necessary.
* Whenever possible, keep to the middle of the sidewalk and avoid dark alleyways or groups of loiterers.
* When leaving your appointment, approach your car with keys in hand.

During the Visit:

* Keep your car keys and your mobile phone in your pocket instead of a bag so they are easily accessible.
* Pay attention to signs like “No Trespassing” or “Beware of Dog.” They may be an indicator of the attitude of the residents toward strangers.
* Pause at the door before knocking and listen. If you hear loud quarreling or sounds of fighting, leave.
* Don’t enter a home unless there is an adult present. If a child answers the door, tell the child to get their parent or caretaker.
* Trust your instincts. Don’t enter homes when you suspect an unsafe situation exists. Don’t enter a home with someone who is under the influence or who is inappropriately dressed. Leave immediately if you ever feel yourself to be in danger.
* Be alert to signs of violence or any sexual advances towards you, however subtle, from anyone in the home.
* Be courteous and professional when introducing yourself. Tell the family your name, the agency you represent and why you are there. Give them your business card and show them your County ID.
* Attempt to always keep clients in front of you and within your visual field, avoid allowing them to follow behind you. Do not enter a room of the house without asking permission.
* Place yourself where you can easily see the front door or somewhere that you can easily observe someone else entering the room.
* Unless necessary, avoid entering rooms that are away from the main exit. Sit close to exit and with a good view of the room. If possible, keep a clear path to an available exit. Avoid positioning yourself in a way in which you would be trapped if you needed to make a quick exit.
* Survey the premises for exits and ways out in an emergency. Pay attention to whether the person you are visiting locks the door.
* Be aware of others.Be mindful of others in the apartment/house for confidentiality and safety reasons.
* Be cautious of pets or other animals even if they appear to be restrained. Ask that pets be put away in a locked kennel or room.
* Establish parameters. Make it clear that you have a schedule to keep and are expected elsewhere later. This puts in some parameters ahead of time in case you must leave for any reason.
* Respect people's personal space. Recall that personal space may extend to possessions. Keep at least an arm’s length between you and others.
* Ask people to turn off tv or radio or lower volume so you can hear what is going on around you
* Be wary of trip hazards that are both external and internal such as steps or lifted floor coverings, electrical wires and try not to walk backwards to avoid tripping.
* If an aggressive incident occurs, remember to try, and remain as calm as possible, speak slowly and calmly.
* Try and keep a barrier (e.g. table) between you and the aggressor where practical.
* Don’t stand face to face with the person (it makes you vulnerable to attacks).
* Stay out of rooms such as kitchens because there are a variety of weapons that could be used.

Transporting Clients:

* Pay attention to the client’s level of agitation (if any), use of intoxicants, and the meaning of the appointment to the client.
* Keep the interior of the vehicle free from potential weapons (for example, pens, pencils, magazines, books, handheld devices, hot beverages).
* When transporting a child, engage the child safety locks in the vehicle and know the proper use and installation of a child safety seat that is appropriate for the child’s age and size.