



ePanicButton



Peace@Work



*Threat Assessment
Dashboard*

Safety in the Field

Outline

- Prepare for an off-site visit to reduce safety risks
- Travel with increased security awareness
- Distinguish warning signs at the site location and position yourself for maximum safety
- Leaving safely
- Documenting concerns

General Preparation

Get to know your visitation area and community

Conduct visits and drive around areas that will be frequented during your work. Go with a veteran worker who can provide advice and history about locations and clients. Be familiar with multiple ways to enter and leave the neighborhood.

Develop relationships with law enforcement community resource officers assigned to the area. They can inform you on dangerous areas and people and provide better support if they are familiar with you and your work.

Develop a relationship with any key individuals or leaders in the community. This may be religious leaders, facility manager or informal matriarchs/patriarchs that have tremendous influence over their community. Building rapport with them so that they recognize that you are helping their community can lead them to pass on their protection over you. These communities can be very tight knit and often there is conflict around these power structures but having their approval and support can go a long way in providing you protection.

Building alliances with people in the neighborhood. They can act as sentries while you are in the residence and tell you about potential dangers.

Establish your schedule with administration and/or co-workers

With your daily schedule of visits, ensure that administration and/or co-workers are aware of who you are visiting, where you will be and when the meetings will be.

If there is a change in the schedule, inform others of the change and the changes. This can be a posted bulletin board back at the main office or an online calendar. A worker back in the office can be assigned this crucial coordination for off site workers.

If it is impractical for administration or a supervisor to track all the employees, set up a buddy-system with a co-worker so that someone is familiar with your schedule.

As changes to a schedule are common throughout the day, make sure that whoever is tracking your meetings is made aware of the changes.

Basically, make sure that someone knows where you are at all times.

Call in system

A good safety practice is to call in when you arrive, in front of the client, stating where you are, who you are visiting and when you will call again when you leave. This lets witnesses know that someone knows where you are and is expecting a call from you shortly. While this can be time consuming and difficult to manage, it can be an additional safety measure to be implemented when visiting potentially dangerous sites.

Another protocol can include call schedules throughout the day. Workers can call in at designated points such as every 2 hours, at lunchtime or the end of the workday.

If the worker does not call back at the designated time. An emergency plan should be determined including calling the worker's phone, using phone location applications available for smart phones, calling the visitor, reaching out to other workers in the area for support, going to the visit site directly and/or calling the police. As visitation work often goes into the evening, establish after work hours contacts so that you are able to reach administrators at any time.

Establishing Codewords

Establish a system of codewords or gestures to discreetly communicate concerns. For example, if you feel threatened or unsafe, make some excuse to make a call and then drop the code-word to inform the listener of your concern. You can have a code-word for low-level concerns where you just want someone to be aware of the potential for danger, that you are uncomfortable, that they should be on stand-by for further communication and to check in with you soon. Another codeword can indicate greater danger and that you need immediate support such as sending law enforcement to your location. If workers go in pairs, the partners can establish hand gestures or actions (such as three coughs) to provide warning or that it is time to leave.

Vehicle inspection and preparation

Ensure that the vehicle is properly maintained with plenty of fuel, a spare tire and other safety equipment. You should be familiar with simple automotive fixes such as changing a tire or jump starting a dead battery.

Depending on the agency and mission, the display of bumper stickers or other decals identifying the organization conducting the visit should be weighed. The question is if you want the public and the neighbors why you are there.

Mobile Phones

Mobile phones may be provided by the agency but otherwise the cost of the phone and services can be deducted from your taxes as a work related expense. Either way, a mobile phone and especially, smart phones with their array of applications can provide invaluable tools for safety. If you do have a phone, apply these safety protocols:

Ensure that the phone battery is charged and be aware of cell phone reception signal in the area visited. Have a car charger for the cell phone to help keep the battery ready.

Keep emergency contacts on speed-dial or whatever shortcut is available for that phone. Workers can familiarize themselves with their phone with how they can set up quick and easy calling to key contacts.

It is also possible to make a call discreetly to have the receiving party listen in to the conversation to know about your situation. Again, the use of codewords can be helpful in these situations.

Generally just available for “smartphones”, there are inexpensive or free phone apps (for iPhones, Android and Windows phones) that can provide a “Panic Button” service. Usually, the pressing of a button can send pre-written distress messages, including location information to a list of receivers. Workers and/or administration can research options but be aware of limitations providing location when the phone has poor or no reception to cell towers or Global Position Satellites (GPS).

Meeting Preparation

Aside from general preparation, specific measures before going on a trip can help you set up your meeting for safety. Before heading out for the day or for a meeting, consider these options to increase your safety.

Review all available documentation regarding the site and people that you are visiting. Previous visits from workers should have documented concerns and warnings. Review and inquire if they have a dog. Talk with other colleagues that have visited the location or even the neighborhood that will be visited.

A critical aspect that impacts safety is the reason for your visit. Extra precautions should be enabled in cases such as

- you are forcing services or a visit such as doing an investigation
- there is reason to suspect fraud
- you will be informing them about bad news such as denial or termination of benefits
- you are required to do a “surprise visit” for inspections

Local law enforcement may have maps of the area detailing the crime frequency by type (assaults, robberies, sexual assaults and carjackings).

Law enforcement reports may also be available about the exact address or residence to show the history of any disturbances or calls to that location.

Online resources can also provide information regarding sexual offenders in the area. www.familywatchdog.us/ is a reliable resource.

Determine Ride-Along support

Determine if the visit requires a two person team. Lone workers are much more vulnerable to assault as one worker can deal with clients directly and the other can focus on the surroundings. It is much harder to assault two people compared to an isolated worker.

While this does cut down the workforce and limit the number of sites that can be visited, this precaution is one of the most effective means of increasing worker safety.

At the very least, workers can schedule their appointments in close proximity to facilitate faster support if needed.

Choosing time to visit

As you plan your schedule, you may consider making visits to the riskier locations or clients at the optimal time. Mornings and mid day may be the best time. Plan your travel to these locations while there is still daylight. More assaults occur in the night time so consider where you will be traveling when it gets dark. As it gets dark early in northern areas in the winter time, plan to be done with these locations before nightfall.

The time of the week and/or month are also factors as Fridays or the first of the month may be times when people receive paychecks and/or benefits that may lead to more substance abuse and activity in certain neighborhoods.

Determine route

You should know the visitation area by visiting during daylight hours, going with someone familiar with the neighborhood or using online tools. Explore the area using online tools like Google Earth which can give streetview and satellite images of the area.

Be aware of multiple routes in and out, identify the safe spots to retreat to for help as well as the high risk areas.

Ensure that there is enough time for the trip so that safety practices are not

dropped due to running late. Rushing to an appointment also impacts your focus on security awareness.

If you use a phone or tablet for directions, have it up and running before you start driving.

Put valuables in the car (trunk) while back at the office. Do not put valuables in the truck while out in the field or when arriving at the meeting site.

Contacting the site

Contact the person you are visiting to confirm the meeting and find out who else may be present. This would remind them of the appointment and let them remove any potential problems.

It is a good idea to make this second call upon your arrival as well so that you learn about any additional people currently present. They can also be on the look out for you and let you inside faster.

In some situations, if practical and appropriate, consider having the meeting to a public, safe location such as a library instead of their residence.

Proper Dress

Dress thinking about the need for maneuverability and defense. Choose attire that allows the ability to easily run if you need to escape. Dress appropriate to the job and professional but practical as well. Footwear is the most important factor for running. Be aware of jewelry, scarves and neckties as they can be grabbed easily and used to choke you.

Agency identification is often put on lanyards that can be another tool for restraining or strangulation. If you do wear a lanyard, make sure that it has "breakaway clips" so that it will not be used to choke you.

Wearing agency ID openly should be dependent on the type of agency and the reason for the visit. While an ID may give some legitimacy to the worker, it could present a danger as well. If people in the neighborhood have any grievances with the agency or may believe that you are carrying valuables such as medication, it could raise the worker's danger.

Traveling

Driver Safety

As you approach your car, check the around and inside the vehicle for any hidden assailants.

As soon as you enter the vehicle, lock the doors. At stop lights, be careful about leaving the windows down.

As with general safety rules, do not text or type on your phone while driving. Set up hand-free methods if you must take a call but it is better to pull over at a safe location to read or type on your phone or tablet.

If you need to stop for whatever reason such as making a call or texting, stop at a safe location such as a parking lot of a busy shopping center, gas station or by a police station to conduct your activity.

If lost or unsure of destination, call the office or co-worker for support. Asking for directions locally should be done at a safe location such as a store or gas station.

In case of car breakdown, contact the main office to request support. Turn on the hazard lights and if you need to walk to another location, lock up the vehicle and go to the nearest safe location. The decision to leave the car may depend on the time of day, the neighborhood and how well traveled the area is.

Take the longer trip around if it will be safer than the more direct route.

If being followed, avoid secluded or isolated routes. Go to the nearest police station or safe location. Call for support if necessary.

Arriving

Drive by inspection

Try to arrive early to scope out the area. Drive by the meeting location to see what is going on and around the neighborhood. Spend a moment watching and listening before getting out of the car.

Parking

Ideally, park as close as possible to your meeting area but choose the safest parking spot. One factor is how well lit the area is as it may be daylight when you arrive but as you return, it could be well into nightfall.

Another point is how populated the area is. Are there people or traffic that can see you if you run into trouble?

Avoid parking near hiding spots such as dumpsters, bushes or alleyways.

Park so that you can drive away easily. Face the car in the direction that you will drive away. Avoid parking in the driveway as someone arriving later can block you in.

If you must, back into driveways so that you drive out quickly and park at the entrance to the driveway to avoid being blocked in. You can also ask the appointee if anyone is expected to arrive while you are meeting.

Walking to location

At all times, when walking to the appointment, while at the meeting and in any public area, be cognizant of your surroundings, the continual arrangement of other people and your position.

A simple method to keep aware of danger is to think of potential assailants as in your Red, Yellow or Green Zones. The objective is to keep potential assailants out of your Red Zone and into your Green Zone.

Red Zone:

Within 0-6 feet of you

Behind you or out of your view, within 15 feet

Blocking your escape route

Yellow Zone:

- Within 7-15 feet of you
- Coming towards your Red Zone
- Those near your escape
- Those that are your path of travel

Green Zone:

- Those beyond 15 feet
- Not near your exit or your path of travel

Safety requires a constant awareness of who is in your Red Zone and to continual maneuver to limit their number. This requires a constant focus on shifting direction of travel, body position and where you are looking.

As you are walking along the sidewalk on the way to the site or while at the meeting, stay focused on those in your Red Zone. Not everyone would be a potential threat but those that give a reason for concern, move to reduce their proximity to you or to help you keep them in your view.

As you walk, choose your path to limit the number of people who you will pass by closely. Be aware of those that you pass and are now behind you. Listen for a change in their pace or if they stop.

When walking to and from the car, walk briskly, with confidence and purpose.

Avoid walking “grab points” where you can not see potential assailants. This includes shut doors, alleyways, vans and any place a person could reach out, grab you and pull you away.

Do not look down at your phone or tablet as you walk but be aware of your environment.

If talking on the phone, keep watch around you. Talking with someone on the phone could act as a safeguard as any assault would be heard by the other party but awareness should never be compromised. However, never let a conversation limit your awareness.

Carry keys on person or in hand so that if a bag or purse is stolen, you are still able to leave. Carrying the keys as you walk towards your car will ensure faster access and departure.

Avoid carrying valuables on your person or in the vehicle such as purses, laptops, tablets and/or showing smartphones and cell phones. If required for the meeting, contain it in a carrying bag.

As you walk, scan the area. Be careful with prolonged eye contact that might invite further communication but let people know that you are aware of their presence.

While walking to your destination, avoid talking with strangers that may try to engage you in a conversation. Use your judgment if you should completely ignore their comments or just give a short reply.

Be aware of the common tactic of one person distracting you with some issue or need and their partner coming in to steal or assault you.

Do not give money to panhandlers but simply express that you don't have any money on you.

While traveling, be cautious of stopping for others even if it appears that someone needs your help. Call law enforcement and report the issue.

Checking for dogs

Before visiting, ask if there are any dogs. While some breeds can certainly be more dangerous, all dogs are capable of biting. Workers can request that the dogs be secured during the meeting if there are any concerns.

Regardless of what you were informed about, at every visit, check before entering any fenced property where dogs could be present. Shake the gate and wait to see if a dog comes running around a corner or look for other obvious signs of a dog staying in a yard.

If you are familiar and comfortable with dogs, you can interact with the animals by petting them but avoid bringing your face down to theirs as this can be a threatening gesture to some dogs.

People can be very protective about their animals, just like their children. Be careful around punishing or correcting their pets if they misbehave. Politely ask the owner to have them removed if they are a nuisance.

Buildings and Public Housing considerations

If you are going to a large multi-residential building, consider asking the client to

meet you at the entrance. If you have a good relation with the client or any contacts that you have there, you can also ask for an escort or for them to at least stay outside till you get in your car.

Know the main offices, security protocols and services and the general layout of any multi-residential buildings with special emphasis on the exits of the building.

Conducting the visit

As you arrive, listen before you knock or ring the bell. Listen for any concerns such as yelling or barking.

When they open the door, introduce yourself and confirm the identity of the person that you are visiting.

During the brief introduction, scan the background with your eyes and ears for potential weapons, additional parties and other possible dangers. If there are any concerns, attempt to conduct your business while on the porch or reschedule. If anything suggests danger or you feel unsafe, do not enter the facility and leave.

Stay focused on the reason for the meeting. Build rapport and be friendly but always professional.

If possible, conduct your meeting in the front room by the entrance. If there is a not a need to enter other parts of the building, stay close to where you can leave easily.

If meeting or visiting a room that is off the main family room or living area, ask that the door be left open. Avoid going into any bedrooms, downstairs or upstairs.

Remain alert throughout the meeting. While the mission or purpose of the meeting must be met, workers need to keep a low level, continual awareness of potential threats.

This may include additional visitors, a change in the appointees attitude or behavior or noticing of a warning sign such as drugs or weapons.

Be aware of weapons, real and improvised. While the sight of a gun would be obvious, items such as shell casings or gun magazines would also suggest the possible existence of firearms.

Be aware of ordinary household items that could also be weapons. The kitchen can hold many potential weapons such as knives and therefore, difficult meetings or conveying negative information should not be done here.

Scan the room with your eyes and ears to be aware of any potential dangers. Depending on the nature of any discovery, the worker can ask the appointee to address this issue, make note of the concern in a later report and/or leave.

Be aware of touch. Shaking hands is appropriate but hugging and other touch must be carefully engaged.

Keep possessions with you while you are moving about the dwelling.

Try to decline offered food or drink but be careful of items that were not prepared in front of you. For example, if a glass was prepared for you, be aware that it could be drugged. Taking pieces from a communal plate or seeing the glass poured from a common container is safer than something that was just handed to you.

At the end of the meeting, make any notes away from the scene. Drive off and go to a safe location to document your meeting. They may see you waiting in your car and come out to prolong the meeting, especially if they want something from you.

Red Flags in behavior

Be aware of client warning signs such as being intoxicated and/or hostile. Either address their behavior, postpone the meeting or simply leave.

Be cautious of inappropriate or flirtatious behavior conducted by the client or others present. "Hitting on" or sexual remarks can act as testing boundaries to take advantage of you. Establish clear boundaries to discourage any inappropriate behavior.

Positioning in regards to other

As you enter the dwelling, shut the door behind you and be aware if it is locked and how to unlock the door. If the resident locks the door and you feel uncomfortable, you can request that they leave it unlocked per agency policy.

Avoid walking in front of others, having them behind you. As you enter or leave a room, going through the door, ask that they pass ahead of you.

Position yourself for defense and escape. Avoid being in a corner. Do not have your access to the exit blocked. Try staying closest to the door.

Position yourself for optimal surveillance, defense and escape. This may include
keeping your back to the wall
eye on the front entrances
able to see outside
easy access to leaving

Physical contact can be misinterpreted as romantic interests or confrontational. During conflict or confrontation, touching an angry person in any way can escalate their hostility. So avoid pushing away or moving an offender if they get in your space. Simply back up till you can get to the exit.

Managing altercations

A dangerous situation arises where there is family conflict or arguments that can escalate into a fight. The visitation is not just to the client but with everyone that might be there.

When children are present and being disruptive, be careful in correcting them in front of the parents.

If going with a partner or colleague, arrange some code signal or sign to indicate a discrete message. Establish a hand gesture or code word as a way to communicate that it is time to go or that there is a need for caution.

Be careful in conveying unwanted or disappointing information. At the point of communication, ensure that you are best positioned for escape.

Scenario: being held or retained against your will
make an excuse to call the office to let them know that you will be late.
drop the code word to let them know you need help.

If in a dangerous situation, make a call to a coworker or supervisor discreetly so that people can listen in to the events. Drop a code-word that indicates that you just want them to listen and not speak. State out loud any important information such as where you are, who you are with and the nature of the problem.

When and how to leave if uncomfortable

When feeling unsafe, have an excuse prepared to explain why you need to leave. Pretending to get a call on your phone is a good method to make an

excuse to leave. State that you will set up another appointment and exit. Be polite but firm with any attempts to delay your departure.

If meeting with a potentially dangerous person or someone at the location gives cause for concern, try to leave first at the end of the meeting. If possible, arrange for the other party to leave after you have had a chance to get far ahead. The point is not to let the person follow you after the meeting.

Never turn your back on a potential assailant. Walk backwards or to the side as you keep an eye on them as you head for the exit.

As you leave, if you are followed by the clients or any potential assailant, leave as soon as you can. They may try to stall you or prolong your stay but get in your car and leave.

Finally, if you are ever uncomfortable, anxious or in any way unsafe, do not enter or if already inside, make some excuse, pretend that you have an emergency call and leave. State that you need to reschedule and leave.

Always listen to instincts

If you feel like you should not go or that you should leave, listen to that intuition and then think about it afterwards.

Transporting clients

With some agency services, workers may be transporting clients which can be a very risky activity for workers. Ideally, agency or employer vehicles should be utilized but if employee cars are used, risk management should evaluate liability concerns. Aside from concerns about assault, the potential for injury from car accidents needs to be considered.

If children are transported, approved and correctly installed car seats need to be available.

An alternative to transporting clients is to provide bus passes to appointees.

If the ride becomes dangerous or the rider becomes combative, pull over to a safe location, exit the vehicle and take your keys and phone. Contact a colleague, the main office or law enforcement as needed.

Critical Incidents

Assault

Leave, if possible and seek medical assistance if required

Contact law enforcement and administration.

Document the incident and retain any evidence such as damaged property.

Robbery

If a robbery occurs, "assist the robbery" by ending it as soon as possible.

- Just give them money and whatever valuables
- Do not resist; just give them (or let them take) the money or items
- Do not try to detain
- If applicable, lock the car doors after the robbery
- Call 911
- Contact the main office or a supervisor
- Remember the description of the assailant by writing down the description as soon as you can. Obtain their license plate information if getting this information does not put you in danger.

Reporting Concern and Documentation

It is vital to document any concerns to improve worker safety. Documentation provides

evidence of client misconduct for any future prosecution

establishes trend in eroding behavior

provides reference for future review by yourself or another worker going to this location

provides data for reviewing the overall risks faced by in the field workers

It may require documentation of concerns to provide administration cause for further funding for safety and security measures.

Document the incident as soon as you can with a focus on a clear, objective description of events.

Conclusion

Review of Key Principles

Safety can be maintained through continual awareness and anticipation of possible danger points.

Listen to your intuition and take action when you feel that you might be in danger.

Act as a support for other workers to be available for their needs and to be aware of potential dangers that they may face.

Further training

Seek additional training in de-escalation of hostile behavior skills to manage any potential threatening or abusive behavior.

Seek additional training on cultural awareness, diversity and conflict resolution training.

Develop and practice first aid training.

Learn and continually practice self-defense skills and techniques.