STANDARD FOR ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING WORKER SAFETY

PURPOSE

The purpose of this standard is to provide direction and guidance to the Child and Family Services (CFS) program regarding establishing and maintaining worker safety. This standard is intended to achieve statewide consistency in the development and application of CFS core services and shall be implemented in the context of all applicable laws, rules and policies. The standard will also provide a measurement for program accountability.

INTRODUCTION

Worker safety is a timely and important issue in today's social services environment. Substance use, domestic violence, and environmental hazards increase the potential dangers social workers face each and every day. Additional challenges to worker safety include the geographic diversity within the state. Risk reduction in an urban setting may be dramatically different from risk reduction in a rural setting. Though risk to workers cannot be completely eliminated, it can be dramatically reduced by increasing awareness. By approaching potential risks in a planful way, social workers can focus on the needs of children and their families and stay safe.

IMPLEMENTING THE STANDARD

This standard establishs a procedural guideline directed toward increasing safety both in and outside the office. Determining potential safety threats to workers begins with information gathering, thinking through and taking relevant precautions.

Before Leaving the Office

- (1) Intake is the ideal place to begin to assess potential worker safety threats. Gather information regarding safety issues prior to initial contact whenever possible including review of the file/program history, when available. Enter all relevant information on the Presenting Issue to be assigned. Possible questions to ask the referent:
 - Is there any history of violence, both reported and/or unreported to law enforcement?
 - Is any member of the family using illegal drugs or drinking alcohol in excess?
 - Is any member of the family mentally ill?
 - Are there firearms in the home?
 - Are there any vicious dogs or other animals that may pose a threat?
 - Are there known safety hazards in the home or on the property?

- Does the referent fear anyone in the home? What do they base that fear on?
- Would a social worker be in danger engaging with that individual?
- Is anyone in the home on probation, or have a known criminal history?
- (2) All Presenting Issues involving potential safety hazards are to be staffed with a supervisor or team lead prior to beginning a safety assessment.
- (3) The safety assessment worker or Supervisor/Team Lead will request law enforcement assistance on all contacts where potential safety threats to the worker have been reported.
 - When law enforcement is unable or unwilling to respond within the required timeframe, Supervisors/Team Leads will document a Variance to the response priorities to reflect the request for law enforcement assistance, their inability to respond timely, and the plan as to when law enforcement will be available to respond.
 - In situations where law enforcement is unwilling to assist the worker, the Program Manager or his/her designee, will contact law enforcement to enlist their assistance.
 - In the event law enforcement continues to be unavailable to the worker in respond to a potentially unsafe situation, the social worker and their Supervisor/Team Lead will consult with the CFS Program Manager and the regional Deputy Attorney General regarding next appropriate steps. These steps may include taking the case to the local Multi-Disciplinary Team for assistance, or taking the situation to the local courts for judicial review.
- (4) Safety assessments should be teamed when potential safety threats exist. It may be appropriate to explore the possibility of the child being brought to the field office by a caretaker, relative, or law enforcement agent, to be interviewed, rather than responding to the home until assistance can be coordinated to reduce the safety threat to the worker.
- (5) Supervisors/Team Leads are to be aware of their worker's location at all times particularly if the safety assessment extends after-hours.
- (6) Cell phones are to be purchased for workers for use when away from the office. Consideration should be given to phones with safety features and the capability of working in more remote areas, such as GPS.
- (7) Each regional office will establish reporting/check-in guidelines for workers that fit the specific capabilities of the office. For example:
 - Regional offices may choose to have an established sign-out board in a confidential area where workers can document specifics as to where they are and when they are

- scheduled to return. If a confidential area is not available, you may want to consider posting white boards outside workers' work spaces, where specifics of worker location can be documented;
- Workers check in with the office at specific intervals during visits that may present safety threats. In the event the worker does not call at the scheduled time, a designated person calls them. If there is no answer, law enforcement should be alerted to respond to the worker's last known location; and
- Have a pre-determined "code word" that the worker can use to indicate that they are in danger while not alerting others at the worker's vicinity.

Away from the Office

- (1) Always make sure others are aware of where you are going.
 - (2) Do not hesitate to ask for assistance from law enforcement, other workers, or your supervisor/team lead if you feel the situation may be unsafe.
 - (3) Be aware of where you park the car, noting the nearest exit. Park so that you will not be required to back up in order to leave the residence. Be prepared to leave quickly if needed.
 - (4) Be aware of your surroundings. Is the area isolated? Are there unknown people or vehicles parked around the residence?
 - (5) Maintain an adequate amount of gas in the car at all times.
 - (6) Know your office policy regarding vehicle safety, i.e. what to do in the event of a breakdown, flat tire, or other mechanical problem with the vehicle. This information is located in your state car packet.
 - (7) Always keep the car locked whether you are inside or outside of the car. Keep windows rolled up to the point where someone cannot put their arm inside the car. Lock your purse or other valuables in the trunk of the car.
 - (8) Be aware of what you are wearing. For example, wear shoes that allow you to move quickly when necessary. Be cautious about wearing jewelry, scarves, ties, etc. that can be grabbed. Wear your Department ID on a break-away lanyard. Carry as few items as possible on your person.
 - (9) When you knock on the door, listen to what may be going on inside the residence. For example, is there fighting, crying, a dog barking, etc.? Stand to the side of the door, never directly in front of the door.
 - (10) Do not enter a residence without being welcomed in by the occupants. Never enter a residence where no one has responded and the door is unlocked or ajar. Do not walk around the residence looking in windows when no one answers the door.
 - (11) Upon entering the home, make note of potential exits.
 - (12) If invited to sit, be aware of where you sit, so you do not sit on sharp or wet items.
 - (13) Always wash your hands immediately after you leave someone's home. Latex gloves and prepackaged towelettes are available in the regional office and in Department cars.
 - (14) Pay attention. Know which situations are the most likely to heighten safety threats, such as the removal of a child from their home.

In the Office

- (1) Develop a way to "flag" potentially dangerous families and individuals in the shared data system. For example, place the phrase "Potential Hazards" in the first line of the PI, as this appears on the global list of Presenting Issues and will be an indicator to read additional information included in that PI.
 - **NOTE:** Service Integration will also provide additional ways to identify potential hazards across the various programs within the Department. This standard will reflect these changes as they become known.
- (2) Know the building safety procedures. Each building has a safety protocol for responding to hazards, including fire, bomb threats, and potentially threatening individuals.
- (3) Follow OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) guidelines if you are exposed to needles, other sharps or any bodily fluids. Immediately after exposure flood the exposed area with water and cleanse the area thoroughly with soap or a disinfectant. Report the incident to your supervisor, and seek medical attention. An Incident Report should be completed at the earliest opportunity. These types of accidents can have serious consequences and the incident report provides the documentation basis for Workman's Compensation to cover the treatment of any injuries. See your regional HR representative if you have any questions.
- (4) Be aware of your office or meeting rooms where staff conduct face-to-face meetings with clients. Does the room have 2 exits? If there is not a second exit, sit near the door so that you can exit quickly if needed. However, never sit between the client and the door. This blocks their ability to exit, both physically and mentally. Are there potentially dangerous items in the room? Do not have paperweights, scissors, etc., available that someone could use as a weapon.
- (5) Keep waiting time to a minimum when possible. Waiting can be an extreme source of frustration.
- (6) Do not meet with anyone when you are alone in the office.
- (7) Do not open suspicious packages that are unexpected or have no return address. Inform a supervisor who will then contact law enforcement to respond.

Dealing with an Angry Individual

- (1) Remain calm. Keep your voice calm and low.
- (2) Keep a safe distance between you and the individual. Stand to the side of an individual, never directly in front of them. Never touch a person on the arm or shoulder to calm them. This may actually escalate the situation.
- (3) Remove yourself from the situation as soon as possible if you feel threatened. Ask for a cooling off time or to reschedule the appointment. This helps the individual regain their composure and stay engaged.
- (4) Use empathic responses that reflect that you are listening such as "yes, I see, tell me more", "help me understand", "this has made you very angry". If any of your responses appear to increase the tension, stop and take a different tact.
- (5) Show respect and sincerity by listening to the persons concerns.

- (6) Do not tell the person what to do, or how you would handle a situation if you were them. Also avoid one-upping such as "if you think that is bad....." or insincere remarks.
- (7) Ask for assistance from Supervisor/Team Lead, another worker, or law enforcement when needed. Never hesitate to ask for help.

Following an Incident

- (1) Seek medical attention immediately if needed. Call 911 if it is a medical emergency.
- (2) Notify your Supervisor/Team Lead as soon as possible.
- (3) Supervisors will inform the regional Program Manager immediately upon being informed of a safety-related incident. In the event the Supervisor/Team Lead is unavailable, notify the regional Program Manager of the incident.
- (4) Notify law enforcement if a worker is injured and file appropriate reports.
- (5) http://infonetdhw/StaffInfo/HealthSafetyWellness.aspx Follow this link and scroll down to Injury Reporting and Forms for information regarding seeking non-emergency medical attention and accident reporting forms. These reports will be forwarded to the Program Manager. Consult Human Resources if you have any questions.
- (6) When incidents involve clients, document in the narrative section in the client's file.
- (7) Responses to stressful incidents are most often based on an individual's previous experiences with traumatic events. Supervisors are available for debriefing. The Employee Assistance Program is also available to employees experiencing after effects of trauma such as sleep disturbance, anxiety/jumpiness, dampened affect, preoccupation with the event, etc.
- (8) Worker safety training is available to new staff and ongoing worker safety training can be made available to experienced staff upon request.

Any action taken not consistent with this standard must be pre-approved by the FACS Division Administrator or designee. The action, rationale and approval must be documented in the file.