

Leadership Ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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organizing for office safety

The door to safety swings on the hinges of common sense.

~Author Unknown

Safety is often on the minds of social workers. A significant portion of a social workers' job can require work in the community, in addition to working in office space. Social workers can be confronted with potential safety issues such as managing angry or mentally unstable clients and working alone during evening and nighttime hours. Job-related violence affects not only the professionals who experience it, but also their families, their clients and their communities (Kelly, 2010).

Social workers often receive training regarding managing safety issues while in the community, however, they should also be aware and prepared to ensure their safety as well as possible when they are in a familiar setting such as their office. Being prepared and using basic techniques can go a long way in providing for a safe work environment. Consider these approaches to increase office safety:

» POSITION OFFICE FURNITURE

STRATEGICALLY. When meeting with clients in an office, strategic positioning of the office furniture can assist the social worker in the event of a dangerous situation. Creating a clear path for the social worker to exit the office is one such strategy. In many agencies, the social worker's desk is positioned so that the client is closest to the door. Altering this arrangement to position the social worker closest to the door will enable the social worker to leave the office more easily if the social worker feels unsafe. Another strategy is to position the social worker's chair facing the door. This will help social workers easily see who enters their office and can prevent "surprise visits" from people entering the space without their knowledge.



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Be familiar with the agency's safety protocols and take an active role in helping the agency ensure safety for its workers.

» **KEEP THE OFFICE DOOR OPEN.** It can be customary to close the door when meeting with a client to ensure privacy and confidentiality. However, keeping the door fully or partially open can nonverbally communicate to the client that others are nearby and are listening or watching. Consulting with a supervisor may be necessary in assessing the appropriateness of this approach especially with regard to confidentiality requirements. This can be a helpful preventive technique when working with a client who may be angry, verbally abusive or aggressive.

» **BE AWARE OF POSSIBLE "WEAPONS" IN THE ENVIRONMENT.** Ordinary objects such as a fire extinguisher, stapler, paper weight, and sharp items, such as a letter opener or pair of scissors, can be easily used as a weapon by someone in an angry state. Limiting the presence of these potential weapons or restricting access to them, such as placing them in a drawer, can enhance safety.

» **PARTNER WITH A SAFETY BUDDY.** A safety buddy is someone who collaborates to maintain safety, such as a co-worker or supervisor. A safety buddy can be used to look for signs of danger when a social worker is meeting with a client and call for help if necessary. The safety buddy should have a plan of what to do if a dangerous situation occurs and should have the needed resources readily available, such as a phone, phone numbers, escape route, etc.

» **BE THOUGHTFUL ABOUT AND COMMUNICATE CONCERNS AHEAD OF TIME.** Preparation for safety takes place before a situation occurs. Assess safety issues before each meeting as the first step in organizing for safety. Communicate concerns about safety issues and confirm that they are adequately addressed before the meeting. A record of this communication, prior to a potentially dangerous incident, can prove to be of great assistance during and after an emergency.

» **TRUST YOURSELF.** There should be no need to take risks regarding personal safety in the workplace. Be familiar with the agency's safety protocols and take an active role in helping the agency ensure safety for its workers. Also, it is very important to trust your instincts in potentially dangerous situations. If a social worker feels unsafe, for any reason, it is important to solicit support, regardless of the results of a safety assessment or the client's history. With regard to safety, it is better to err on the side of caution, rather than face situations under-prepared. Feeling safe and secure when working with clients will ultimately benefit the client, as well as the social worker.

RESOURCES

National Association of Social Workers Center for Workforce Studies provides information on the social work workforce. This information includes helpful resources to enhance professional skills. www.socialworkers.org

National Association of Social Workers' collaboration with the Center for Health Workforce Studies, University at Albany conducted a benchmark national study of 10,000 licensed social workers. The information presented in this fact sheet is based on this 2004 study and its findings. <http://workforce.socialworkers.org/whatsnew/safety.pdf>

REFERENCES

Kelly, James J. (2010). The Urgency of Social Worker Safety. *NASW News* Volume 55, No. 9. Retrieved from www.socialworkers.org/pubs/news/2010/10/social-worker-safety.asp