Guidelines for

Social Work Safety

in the workplace

About the Association

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the United States with over 140,000 members. The mission of NASW is to enhance the professional growth and development of its members, to create and maintain professional standards, and to advance sound social policies.

Social Work Safety

Safety

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Introduction

A major tenet of the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) threefold mission is to promote, develop, and protect the practice of social work and social workers. In alignment with that mission, NASW establishes professional standards and guidelines to support quality social work practice.

Social workers provide services in an increasingly complex, dynamic social environment and have a broadening client base. The profession's primary mission is "to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty" (NASW, 2008, p. 1). Within the past decade, the United States experienced a severe recession and related social changes that have led to increases in the number of people unable to meet their basic needs without assistance from public and private agencies. These social and economic changes have created pressures in social work practice settings as more people seek social work services from agencies that have often experienced budget cuts and sometimes lack adequate resources to meet the needs of people desperate for help.

Unfortunately, the number and variety of people to whom social workers provide services and the variety of settings in which these services are provided have contributed to an increasingly unpredictable, and often unsafe, environment for social work practice. Social workers have been the targets of verbal and physical assaults

in agencies as well as during field visits with clients. Tragically, some social workers have also been permanently injured or have lost their lives "in the line of duty."

Establishing safety guidelines for the profession is timely as the profession is expected to grow by 25 percent before 2020 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). These guidelines are important to the retention and recruitment of a professional social work force. Moreover, NASW guidelines may be a helpful resource to communities; private and public agencies; and local, state, and federal policymakers invested in creating a safer work environment for social workers.

Guiding Principles

The development of these guidelines is informed by the following principles:

Acknowledgment of the Context of Social Work Practice

These guidelines address safety and risk factors associated with social work practice, but they should not be interpreted to infer that social work is an inherently or unusually dangerous profession. Social workers acknowledge and understand that interaction with clients is a cornerstone of many practice settings. Most clients and families that social workers serve do not present threats or pose danger. In cases where threats are present, the majority of social workers find that their employers address these issues appropriately (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). There are, however, social work

settings (for example, child welfare, adult protective services, mental health, criminal justice, domestic violence shelters) where social workers may face increased risks of violence. These guidelines are meant to support social workers in practice but are not meant to stereotype or denigrate client populations who receive services from social workers.

Social Workers' Rights to Report Safety Concerns

Social workers have the right to work in safe environments and to advocate for safe working conditions. Social workers who report concerns regarding their personal safety, or who request assistance in assuring their safety, should not fear retaliation, blame, or questioning of their competency from their supervisors or colleagues.

Application of Universal Safety Precautions

Social workers should routinely practice universal safety precautions in their work. Violence can and does occur in every economic, social, gender, and racial group. To avoid stereotyping particular groups of people and to promote safety, social workers should practice safety assessment and risk reduction with all clients and in all settings. A thorough understanding of the risk factors (individual/clinical, environmental, and historical) associated with elevated risk for violence can inform safety assessments. Social workers should also be aware of the potential that their personal information on the Internet, particularly social networking sites, can be accessed by anyone. Universal safety precautions also include the establishment of safety plans as a matter of routine planning. The adoption of universal safety precautions

should not preclude agencies from establishing particular safety precautions when social workers are asked to perform dangerous tasks. In those situations, agencies should establish specific policies (for example, law enforcement accompanies social workers when involuntarily removing a child from parents or an incapacitated adult from a home) to reduce the risk of harm to social workers.

Goals of the Guidelines

These guidelines address safety within the context of social work practice. Ideally, these guidelines can stimulate the development of agency policies and practices to enhance social worker safety. In addition, social workers can use these guidelines to assess agency culture of safety and to advance professional and personal well-being. As well, schools of social work can better assure that their curriculums and field placement practices are in line with the goals of a safer profession. The specific goals of the guidelines are

- to inform social workers, policymakers, employers, and the public about the importance of social worker safety in agency and field work
- to provide a basis for the development of social work undergraduate, graduate, and field placement practice; and agency in-service programs, continuing education materials, and tools related to social work safety
- to advocate for social workers' rights to work environments that promote safety
- to support the exploration of technology that enhances social worker safety

- to encourage social workers to participate in the development and refinement of public policy that addresses social worker safety through licensing, regulation, and resources
- to encourage social workers to participate in the development, refinement, and integration of best practices in promoting social worker safety.

Guidelines for Social Worker Safety in the Workplace

Standard 1. Organizational Culture of Safety and Security
Agencies that employ social workers should establish and maintain an organizational culture that promotes safety and security for their staff.

Interpretation
Social workers should be able to practice in environments free from physical, verbal, and psychological violence and threats of violence. Workplace safety demands diligence from organizational leadership at every step of the safety continuum—from violence prevention and organizational responses to violent acts to providing resources and supports to social workers who experience acts of violence. Therefore, agencies that employ social workers should demonstrate their ability to address issues of safety for their staff. Social work employers must protect their employees by instituting policies and procedures that maximize safety and security in the office as well as in the field. A culture of safety includes the following

- Safety Policies that
  - provide an oral and written commitment by agency leadership to promote the safety of all staff, including support, paraprofessional, and professional staff
  - govern the management of dangerous (or hostile and violent) behavior in the workplace (including clients, coworkers, and supervisors)
  - establish safety teams or safety committees to ensure adherence to policy and procedure, as well as to provide peer support during and after an incident.
- A Safety Committee that
  - oversees the conscientious adoption, use, and ongoing review of the agency's policies that underscore the commitment to safety for staff, clients, administration, and governing boards
  - ensures that safety protocols that are instituted, updated, and practiced regularly
  - identifies and investigates physical measures and technology that contribute to and promote the safety of social work staff
  - provides ongoing proactive risk assessment that identifies line staff at risk for violence, precarious settings and working conditions, as well as orientation and in-service training on practices that can reduce or minimize or eliminate factors associated with elevated risk.
- Data Management and Reporting Activities that
  - develop and implement an incident reporting system to document and track instances of threats, acts of violence, and damage to property. The reporting system

should allow for analysis of data on type of incident, location, pervasiveness, and occurrence.

- ◎ create a mechanism for reporting and collecting data on an ongoing basis on incidents of assaults, threats, and abuse that can be analyzed to inform the agency about the incidence and prevalence of violence to guide the development of safety protocols and allocation of resources.
- ◎ regularly gather and disseminate information about all safety risks including assaults, threats, and abuse and develop strategies for managing them via case consultations, training and education, and policy development.

Standard 2. Prevention
The goal of organizations that employ social workers should be to create a culture of safety that adopts a proactive preventative approach to violence management and risk.

Interpretation
Prevention activities use available information to minimize the risk of future incidents of violence. Therefore, a preventative approach involves analyzing and understanding past incidents and determining actions that can circumvent or avoid their reoccurrence. In assessing past incidents, the following factors should be considered:

- type of incident (for example, verbal threat/ abuse, intimidation, attempted or actual physical assault, property damage, stalking)
- severity of the incident (costs to the well-being of people or organizations)

- ◎ physical health (bodily physical harm)
- ◎ mental health (psychological and emotional harm/toll/impact)
- ◎ financial (monetary costs to property, people, or organization)
- staff, clients, and witnesses involved in or witnessing the incident
- weaknesses/breaches of protocol or gaps in protocol or policies that facilitated/contributed to, or did not deter, the incident (procedural, environmental, errors in assessment or misunderstanding of the safety protocol)
- orientation and training needs of staff for risk reduction and safety promotion
- assessment of current safety measures and policies and gaps in protocols/procedures.

Standard 3. Office Safety
Social workers' office environments should promote safety for social workers and their clients.

Interpretation
The office/agency environment where social workers work should not only be safe, but should actively promote and encourage safe practices. These practices can include, but are not limited to

- working spaces that allow for social workers to exit easily in potentially violent situations
- access to alarm systems that can alert others to a safety risk or breach
- access to visually open meeting spaces ("Risk Rooms") or presence of another staff team member when meeting with a client who may be verbally abusive or aggressive

- restricted access to objects that may be used as weapons (for example, stapler, paper weights, scissors, molded plastic chairs or office décor that can be picked up and thrown, and so forth)
- secure entry and access (for example, monitored, restricted access security guard, metal detector screening, bulletproof glass)
- well-lit hallways that lead to employees' workspaces
- secure entrances to employees' workspaces that are separate from public spaces.

Standard 4. Use of Safety Technology
Organizations that employ social workers should use technology appropriately and effectively to minimize risk.

Interpretation
Risk assessments may highlight the need to introduce technology to minimize risk of harm to social workers. Although technology is not a solution in and of itself, it can be a helpful tool in establishing and maintaining a culture of safety. It is important that staff understand that technology will not prevent incidents from occurring. Technology is not a substitute for safety planning.

As with all technological tools, consideration should be given to their limitations as well as the legal and ethical implications of their usage. Successful use of technology relies on a comprehensive and inclusive approach to identifying an appropriate system(s), and a commitment by all staff to use it appropriately. Technology can augment, but not replace, other important and critical requirements in these

guidelines. Reliance on technology alone can promote a false sense of security.

The introduction of safety technology must be accompanied by clear protocols and training regarding the limits and proper usage, by whom, and under what circumstances. Technological tools to consider include the following:

■ Internal alert systems that can be activated from panic buttons in offices
■ Internal alert systems that can be activated from key fobs or other mobile devices
■ Panic buttons that are linked to public safety departments (police, emergency rooms, fire departments)
■ Mobile safety devices that may incorporate GPS and/or audio/video recording
■ Personal safety devices (for example, silent panic buttons, identification card holder with audio monitoring)
■ Security cameras where appropriate.

Clients and staff must be informed about the use of safety technology, particularly if audio/video recording is involved. Although clients need not be informed about the location of internal alert systems, the knowledge that safety technology is in use may deter violent behavior. However, under no circumstances should technology be used to intimidate or coerce clients or staff. Safety technology should not be used to "spy" on staff or to provide undetected supervision without staff members' knowledge.

Standard 5. Use of Mobile Phones
Social workers should be provided with mobile phones to promote their safety in the field.

Interpretation
Mobile phones have become a necessity for communication outside the office. Wherever possible, social workers should use agency phones, rather than personal phones, to reduce exposure of their personal information. Although excellent tools for communication, a mobile phone can also potentially escalate an aggressive situation, and the social worker should therefore use it in a sensitive and sensible manner. To increase the safety provided by a mobile phone, social workers should

- keep the mobile phone fully charged, have a replacement battery on hand for emergencies, and keep a phone charger in the car
- be familiar with limitations of cell phone coverage in areas where they may visit
- ensure that they know how to use the phone properly before going into the field
- keep emergency contacts on speed dial
- keep GPS-enabled mobile phone applications activated at all times while in the field
- agree on and use "code" words or phrases to help social workers convey the nature of threats to their managers or colleagues
- remember to not use handheld mobile phones while driving
- send text messages of knowledge of circumstances, instead of calling, but not while driving
- use the phone discreetly, so as not to inadvertently escalate a potentially volatile situation and to avoid becoming a possible target for robbery.

Standard 6. Risk Assessment for Field Visits
**Social workers should assess and take steps
to reduce their risk for violence prior to each
field visit.**

Interpretation
Social workers who make visits to clients in
the field may be subjected to a range of safety
risks. Prior to each field visit, social workers
should conduct a risk assessment that includes
the following:

- Assessment of environmental factors
  - Does the worker have a complete and
    exact address of the visit, to avoid
    appearing lost or confused?
  - Does the neighborhood pose risks for
    violence?
  - Is the visit scheduled at a time of day
    that is more risky than other times?
  - Are there other factors that may pose a
    risk for violence or danger (weather or
    disaster conditions, extreme heat or
    cold, icy roads)?
  - Have any events occurred in the
    neighborhood within the last 48 hours that
    might increase risk (for example, homicides,
    abductions, robberies, drug raids,)?
  - Does the area have reduced reception
    for mobile devices (for example, tunnels,
    rural areas)?
  - Will identification of the social worker's
    agency (for example, vehicle logo)
    increase risk?
  - Are there groups or individuals in the path
    to the home or near the location of the visit?
- Assessment of client's living space
  - Does accessing the space require the use of
    an elevator or flights of stairs?

- Are common spaces well-lit and clean?
- Are exits easily accessible?
- Who is likely to be in the client's home during the visit?
  - children
  - parents
  - other relatives or friends
  - pets, including guard dogs
- Is/are the client, family members, or friends of the client known to engage in criminal or dangerous activities in the home?
- Is there an increased risk of disease, infection, or pests in the home environment?
- Is the family known to have weapons?

■ Assessment of proposed work activities
- Will the social worker engage in high-risk activities during the visit (for example, removing a child, notifying of reduction in benefits, terminating parental rights, executing a civil commitment procedure, helping a domestic violence victim to a safe house, delivering other potentially unwelcome information)?

■ Assessment of increased risk due to client's condition
- Does the client have an active substance abuse problem, particularly with alcohol?
- Does the client have a mental illness or personality disorder, particularly if untreated?
- Does the client have a history of or frequent violence or threatening behavior?
- Does the client have a communicable disease?

■ Assessment of worker vulnerability
- Working alone
- Visible physical conditions that may increase vulnerability (pregnancy, disabilities, use of cane or walking aid)

- Lack of experience
- Appearing timid, vulnerable, lost, or confused
- Lax attitude and/or overconfidence
- Worker bias or stereotyping that causes over- or underreaction to safety threats
- Attire (wearing jewelry and other valuables, high-heeled shoes, and so forth) that adds to vulnerability
- Accessories (political buttons, religious jewelry) that may trigger reactions
- Appearance (for example, tattoos, body piercings) that cannot be covered and that might attract/increase attention
- Lack of a safety plan

- Assessment of condition of emergency equipment that may be needed
  - Vehicle in good repair and working condition
  - Mobile device fully charged
  - Two-way radio working
  - Emergency telephone numbers available.
- Discussion of the issue of safety with the client, formally as a mutual safety contract or informally as a discussion of mutual safety

Social workers should be well trained in the use of their agency's risk assessment instrument and supervised to ensure consistency in practice. When a risk is identified, a safety plan must be created and adapted as necessary throughout the case planning and a plan of action to reduce or minimize that risk implemented. When the risk is determined to be too great or is unable to be minimized through the use of normal precautions, the social worker should have the opportunity, with management support, to state his or her concerns and develop an alternative plan until the risk is minimized by changed conditions or when appropriate support is available. The appropriate support may include being

accompanied by a colleague or supervisor, being accompanied by law enforcement, changing the day or time of the visit, changing the site of the visit to a safer venue, or postponing the visit.

Standard 7. Transporting Clients
Social workers should acknowledge particular safety concerns when transporting clients.

Interpretation
When transporting clients is an expectation of the job, employers should ensure that policies and practices are in place to protect both social workers and clients. At the time of pick up, the social worker should assess

- the client's level of agitation (if any), use of intoxicants, and the meaning of the appointment to the client
- the possibility that the client has a weapon
- their own perception of a safety risk.

The social worker should also assess the condition of the vehicle:

- Is the interior of the vehicle free from potential weapons (for example, pens, pencils, magazines, books, handheld devices, hot beverages)?
- Is the vehicle in good working condition (for example, ample gas, working brakes, headlights/tail lights)?
- Is the vehicle equipped with proper safety equipment in case of an emergency (for example, flares, battery cables, spare tire)?

When transporting a child, the social
worker should

- engage the child safety locks in the vehicle
- know the proper use and installation of a
  child safety seat that is appropriate for the
  child's age and size
- use a "buddy system"—that is, have a
  second social worker in the vehicle when
  transporting a client.

If the client is assessed to be unsafe to transport,
or the vehicle is assessed to be unsafe to operate,
agency policies should prohibit the social worker
from transporting the client.

Standard 8. Comprehensive Reporting Practices
**Social workers should engage in comprehensive
reporting practices regarding field visits.**

Interpretation
Social workers who are in the field should
ensure that their in-office setting (supervisor,
manager, coworker) is aware of their whereabouts
and plans. This information should be kept in a
secure location, accessible only to staff who need
it. Prior to each field visit, social workers should

- provide addresses of visit and appointment
  times in the order they are scheduled
- provide information about the clients
  being visited
- indicate the length of each visit (estimated
  arrival and departure times)
- provide information about the vehicle they
  will use (license number, make, model, color)
- report change of plans to their supervisor or
  designated agency representative (for

example, if a visit or appointment is
canceled or delayed)

■ provide information on how to reach them
(for example, cell phone)

■ carry agency identification cards at all times

Following each visit, the social workers should
report should report back to their supervisor or
designated agency representative when the
meeting is concluded or as soon as it is safe
to do so. Social workers should also report
completion and progress toward the next
scheduled appointment or close of business.
Agencies should develop and strictly adhere
to systems that support verification of worker
safety in the field and establish that social
workers have safely completed their visits. If a
social worker misses an appointment, these
systems should be activated to track the social
worker and ensure her or his safety. If normal
contact cannot be made with the social worker
in the field, agencies should develop policies
about when law enforcement is called.

Standard 9. Post-Incident Reporting and Response
**Employers of social workers should
develop protocols that follow an incidence
of violence or abuse.**

Interpretation
Despite an agency's best intentions, every
incidence of violence or abuse cannot be
anticipated or avoided. However, employers of
social workers have an obligation to develop
policies and protocols following a violent or
abusive incident that seek to ameliorate the
current victim's condition and to avoid future

incidents. The protocols can include the following:

- Providing prompt assistance to the employee
- Assessing medical need and obtaining medical assistance
- Debriefing with staff and witnesses
- Completing an incident report that details the incident, where and when the incident occurred, who was present/involved, a description of injuries, factors contributing to the event and whether or not medical services were advised and/or accessed.
- Developing a safety plan in response to the incident
- Intervening with other clients and observers of the incident
- Addressing the caseload distribution of the affected social worker
- Offering technical and legal assistance as needed
- Providing financial compensation for damage to property
- Offering voluntary referrals to Employee Assistance program services
- Following up on safety plan
- Implementing a quality assurance review of policies and procedures

Standard 10. Safety Training
Social workers should participate in annual training (or case supervision as needed) that develops and maintains their ability to practice safely.

Interpretation
Safety training can include skill building in risk assessment, risk management, risk reduction, a

previously constructed Safety Plan of Action
that includes exit strategies, verbal de-escalation
techniques, effective strategies for clinical
interventions with violent or potentially violent
clients, and nonviolent self-defense and the
impact of secondary trauma. Safety training can
also include the use of safety technology devices
and advocating for self-care to effectively
manage secondary trauma in the workplace.

Standard 11. Student Safety
**Social workers need to be prepared for safe
social work practice during their student years.**

Interpretation
As practicum experiences are an important part
of the social work curriculum, schools of social
work are responsible for ensuring that social
work students are educated about concepts and
techniques related to safety as well as supervised
in safe environments. Social work safety should
be part of the curriculum/training of field
practicum instructors. Schools should place
students in settings with sound safety policies
and procedures that should be reviewed with
students in school and in the placement setting.
Professional safety should be part of the school
and agency orientations. Students who have
safety concerns about their placements must be
provided with supports until the safety concerns
have abated. If the concerns cannot be
adequately addressed, the student must be
offered an alternative placement.

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