

# **NASW Practice Standards for Social Workers' Safety in the Workplace**

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## 1 **Introduction**

2 Social workers provide services in a wide range of complex settings. These include acute care  
3 hospitals, outpatient clinics, schools, community-based organizations, justice systems, child  
4 welfare programs, long-term care, private practice, and crisis response programs. The demand  
5 for social work services continues to grow and is projected to increase. The acute need for  
6 social work services is felt in all settings, especially in underserved and rural communities.  
7 This expansion underscores the profession's growing influence and importance while  
8 demonstrating the profession's essential support and contribution to addressing diverse  
9 evolving human needs. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has a threefold  
10 mission: (1) to enhance the professional growth of its members, (2) to create and maintain  
11 professional standards, and (3) to advance sound social policies.

12         Updating the 2013 *Guidelines for Social Worker Safety in the Workplace* is both critical  
13 and timely. The employment of social workers in all settings is projected to grow by more than  
14 six percent over the next decade, outpacing the average for all other professions (U.S. Bureau  
15 of Labor Statistics, 2025). This growth is driven by increasing demand for social work services  
16 in healthcare, behavioral health services, justice settings, child welfare settings, and services  
17 for older adults. As the social work profession responds to the rising demand, it is vital that  
18 social workers are equipped with clear, practical, and adaptable safety standards that reflect the  
19 realities of practice while honoring the foundational values of the profession.

20         Social workers provide services in an increasingly wider range of practice settings,  
21 which serve a larger number of individuals with diverse needs. Directly serving the public  
22 results in social workers practicing in environments that can be increasingly unpredictable and  
23 often unsafe. Social workers have been the targets of verbal and physical assaults in both  
24 agency and community settings (Newhill, 2025). Tragically, multiple social workers have been

25 permanently injured or killed by simply doing their job “in the line of duty.” (Robiner et al.,  
26 2023).

27 Safety is a critical aspect to ensuring social workers can perform their duties without  
28 risk to their physical, emotional, or psychological well-being. Social workers often engage with  
29 vulnerable or high-risk populations, which may expose them to challenging environments,  
30 aggressive behavior, or emotionally taxing situations. To maintain safety, it is essential to  
31 implement clear protocols, provide adequate training in crisis management and crisis  
32 resolution, and foster supportive workplace cultures. Additionally, agencies and organizations  
33 should provide staff with consistent access to supervision, mental health, substance use, and  
34 wellness resources to manage stress and heal from traumatic workplace events. These processes  
35 reduce the risk of compassion fatigue and maintain a strong and resilient social work  
36 workforce. Prioritizing strong social work safety standards consistently allows social workers  
37 to work in physically and psychologically safe environments which then enhances the quality  
38 and continuity of care provided to clients.

39 The NASW *Standards for Social Workers’ Safety in the Workplace* provide a dynamic,  
40 forward-thinking view that reflects the value of the social work profession in developing a  
41 resilient, responsive, and ethically grounded workforce. These standards provide a strong  
42 foundation, ensuring that social workers are afforded safe work environments and resources  
43 while maintaining trust and providing practice services to all.

#### 44 **Guiding Principles**

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

#### 46 ***Context of Social Work Practice***

47 These NASW *Practice Standards for Social Workers’ Safety in the Workplace* address safety  
48 and risk factors associated with social work practice, but they should not be interpreted to infer  
49 that social work is an inherently or unusually dangerous profession. Social workers

50 acknowledge and understand that interaction with clients is a cornerstone of many practice  
51 settings. Most clients and families that social workers serve do not present threats or pose  
52 danger. In cases where threats are present, the majority of social workers find that their  
53 employers address these issues appropriately (Whitaker et al., 2006). Although some settings  
54 carry elevated risk for violence no setting is immune from violence occurring. These standards  
55 are meant to support social workers in practice but are not meant to stereotype or denigrate  
56 client populations who receive services from social workers.

### 57 *Social Workers' Rights to Report Safety Concerns*

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

### 62 *Universal Safety Precautions*

63 Social workers should routinely practice universal safety precautions in their work. Violence  
64 can and does occur in every economic, social, gender, and racial group. To avoid stereotyping  
65 particular groups of people and to promote safety, social workers should practice safety  
66 assessment and risk reduction with all clients and in all settings. Safety assessments that take  
67 into consideration individual, environmental, and historical aspects can help to inform elevated  
68 risk for violence through the understanding of protective factors and risk factors.

69 Universal safety precautions also include the establishment of safety plans as a matter  
70 of routine planning. The adoption of universal safety precautions should not preclude agencies  
71 from establishing certain safety precautions when social workers are asked to perform  
72 dangerous tasks. In those situations, agencies should establish specific policies (for example,  
73 law enforcement accompanies social workers when removing a child from parents or an  
74 incapacitated adult from a home) to reduce the risk of harm to social workers.

75           Additionally, social workers should be aware that their personal information on the  
76 internet, particularly on social networking sites, can be accessed by anyone. Therefore, social  
77 workers should be reminded to safeguard their personal information as much as possible to  
78 lessen the chance of potential harm when they are asked to perform dangerous tasks that may  
79 put them at risk.

### 80 **Goals of the Standards**

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

- 87       • inform social workers, policymakers, employers, and the public about the importance  
88       of social worker safety in agency and fieldwork.
- 89       • provide a basis for the development of social work undergraduate, graduate, and field  
90       placement practice and agency in-service programs, continuing education materials,  
91       and tools related to social work safety.
- 92       • advocate for social workers' rights to work in environments that promote safety.
- 93       • support the exploration of technology that enhances social worker safety.
- 94       • encourage social workers to participate in the development and refinement of public  
95       policy that addresses social worker safety through licensing, regulation, and  
96       resources.
- 97       • encourage social workers to participate in the development, refinement, and  
98       integration of best practices in promoting social worker safety.

## 99 **Standards for Social Workers' Safety in the Workplace**

### 100 **1. Ethics and Values**

101 Social workers in all areas of practice shall consistently demonstrate a commitment to the  
102 ethics and values of the social work profession. The NASW (2021) *Code of Ethics* serves as a  
103 guide to ethical decision making while understanding the unique aspects of social workers'  
104 practice focus. The *Code of Ethics* provides the framework for employing best practices of  
105 social workers' safety in the workplace.

106

### 107 **Interpretation**

108 The ethical obligations of the social work profession, with its core values, principles, and  
109 standards, are outlined in the NASW *Code of Ethics*. The NASW *Code of Ethics* serves to  
110 guide the professional conduct of social work practitioners. When working with clients who  
111 may pose a safety risk, social workers should always practice ethically while simultaneously  
112 balancing multiple legal issues and mandates. The social work profession's core values are  
113 service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human  
114 relationships, integrity, and competence. These core values are embedded in and guide the  
115 ethical standards and principles that apply to all types of social work practice. Social work  
116 safety standards must be developed and implemented from within a social work professional  
117 and ethical framework established through the *Code of Ethics*. The *Code of Ethics* establishes  
118 the ethical responsibilities of all social workers with respect to themselves, the people whom  
119 they directly or indirectly serve, their colleagues, their employers, and society.

120 Practicing ethically also involves embracing the mission of the social work profession,  
121 emphasizing the importance of the person-in-environment perspective, respecting and  
122 supporting both human diversity and common human needs while also providing social

123 workers' safety in the workplace. Because of the complexities of social work there are times  
124 when two or more ethical standards or duties equally apply to a situation, are equally  
125 compelling, and conflict with one another when implemented. In some scenarios, an ethical  
126 dilemma occurs when the social worker must follow a legal mandate that conflicts with the  
127 standards of the *NASW Code of Ethics*, which can result in social workers performing their  
128 duties and responsibilities in unsafe circumstances. When faced with such ethical dilemmas,  
129 the *NASW Code of Ethics* serves as a tool or framework for the social worker and place of  
130 employment to help implement policies and procedures that will create and enhance  
131 appropriate safety measures. At any moment that social workers feel unsafe, they are  
132 encouraged to obtain guidance from their supervisors, colleagues, or NASW during their  
133 decision-making process to help ensure they are not at risk and are working in safe  
134 conditions.

135

## 136 **2. Organizational Culture of Safety and Security**

137 Agencies that employ social workers shall establish and maintain an organizational culture that  
138 promotes safety and security for their staff.

139

### 140 **Interpretation**

141 Social workers should be able to practice in environments free from physical, verbal, and  
142 psychological violence and threats of violence. Workplace safety for social workers demands  
143 diligence from organizational leadership at every step of the safety continuum—from violence  
144 prevention to organizational responses to violent acts, including providing resources and  
145 support to social workers who experience acts of violence. Agencies that employ social  
146 workers must demonstrate their ability to address issues of safety for their employees. Social  
147 work employers must protect their employees by instituting policies, procedures, and training

148 that maximize safety and security in the office environment, as well as in communities in which  
149 social workers serve. A culture of safety includes the following:

150 Safety Policies

- 151 • Provide an annual oral and written commitment by agency leadership to promote the  
152 safety of all employees.
- 153 • Govern the management of disruptive, dangerous, hostile and/or violent behavior in the  
154 workplace, inclusive of client-on-staff, staff-on-client, and staff-on-staff, which may  
155 include interpersonal violence.
- 156 • Establish diverse and inclusive workplace violence prevention committees to ensure  
157 adherence to policy, procedure, and documentation expectations, as well as providing  
158 peer support during and after an incident.

159 An Interdisciplinary Threat Management Team

- 160 • Implements threat management practices by embedding these principles in policy and  
161 practice, continuously emphasizing an agency's commitment to staff, people in service,  
162 administration, and governing boards.
- 163 • Ensure threat management principles and practices, including safety protocols, are  
164 instituted, implemented, evaluated, updated, and regularly practiced.
- 165 • Identifies and investigate physical measures and technology that contribute to and  
166 promote the safety of social work employees.
- 167 • Establishes consistent continuous quality improvement cycles to enhance  
168 organizational analysis of reported safety and security incidents, and assessment of  
169 documented environmental concerns.
- 170 • Provides ongoing proactive risk assessments and promotes processes that identify all  
171 employees at risk for violence, in any workspace or condition.

- 172       • Facilitates orientation and in-service training on practices that can reduce, minimize, or  
173       eliminate factors associated with elevated safety risk.

174    Data Management and Reporting Activities

- 175       • Implement for all employees an organizational commitment to develop, train, and  
176       continuously improve an incident reporting system to document and track instances of  
177       disruptive and disorderly behaviors, harassment, threats, other acts of violence, and  
178       damage to property. The reporting system should allow for analysis of data on types of  
179       incidents, location, pervasiveness, and occurrences.
- 180       • Create a mechanism for reporting and collecting data on an ongoing basis on incidents  
181       of assaults, threats, and abuse that can be analyzed to inform the agency and its policies  
182       about the incidence and prevalence of violence, guiding the development of safety  
183       protocols and allocation of resources for employee safety training and interventions.
- 184       • Regularly gather and disseminate information about all identified organizational safety  
185       risks, including disruptive and disorderly behaviors, assaults, threats, and abuse, and  
186       develop strategies for managing them via case consultations, training and education,  
187       and policy development.

188

189    **3: Prevention**

190    Organizations employing social workers shall ensure employees are provided with and are  
191    active participants in a culture of safety that adopts a proactive approach to managing violence  
192    prevention and risks.

193

194    **Interpretation**

195    Prevention activities use available information to minimize the risk of future incidents of  
196    violence. A proactive approach involves analyzing and understanding past incidents and

197 actively applies this knowledge to determine actions that can circumvent or avoid recurrence.  
198 In assessing organizational safety and past incidents, the following factors should be  
199 considered:

- 200 • Reviews of the type of incident, which may include verbal threats and abuse; attempted  
201 or actual physical assaults; ethnic, racial, or sexual harassment, including incidents  
202 involving technology; written threats; unwanted sexual attention; intimidation; property  
203 damage; or stalking.
- 204 • Severity of the incident (costs to the emotional well-being of people or organizations)
  - 205 ▪ physical health (bodily physical harm)
  - 206 ▪ mental health (psychological and emotional harm)
  - 207 ▪ financial impact (monetary costs to property, people, or organization).
- 208 • Ongoing assessments of current and recommended safety measures including policy  
209 gaps in protocols and procedures in the organization as a result of having  
210 multidisciplinary teams.
- 211 • Weaknesses and breaches of protocol or gaps in policies that facilitated and/or  
212 contributed to or did not deter the incident including (but not limited to) procedural or  
213 environmental errors in assessment or a misunderstanding of the safety protocols,  
214 written reports, or any other procedural safeguards.
- 215 • Support provided and available to individual social workers for emotional well-being,  
216 time off from work, and self-care.
- 217 • Annual and scheduled orientation and review of training needs for risk reduction and  
218 safety protocols in the office and the community.

219

#### 220 **4. Office Safety**

221 Social workers' office environments shall promote safety for social workers and their clients.

222

223 **Interpretation**

224 The office/agency environment in which social workers work should not only be safe but must  
225 actively promote and encourage safe practices. These practices can include protective  
226 safeguards that help to decrease safety risk by including the following safety measures:

- 227 • Provide working spaces that will allow social workers to enter and exit easily during  
228 disruptive, disorderly, or violent situations.
- 229 • Provide alarm systems that can alert others to safety risks or breach. If an agency does  
230 not have the resources to invest in an alarm system, code words or phrases indicating  
231 that there is danger or help is needed can be used. It is important to hold regular practice  
232 drills using the alarm or code word, so everyone knows what to do if a crisis occurs.
- 233 • Provide access to visually open meeting spaces or the presence of another staff when  
234 meeting with a client who may be verbally abusive or aggressive.
- 235 • Restrict or remove and consistently be mindful of access to any objects that may be  
236 used as weapons (stapler, letter opener, paperweight, scissors, molded plastic chair, or  
237 office décor that can be picked up and used directly as a weapon and/or thrown)
- 238 • Prevent people from bringing any type of weapons into the facility. Prevention  
239 strategies can include signage specifying that weapons are not allowed on the premises  
240 for any reason, the installation of a metal detector, and the presence of security  
241 personnel at public entrances and high-risk areas. Employees must be aware of firearm  
242 laws in their state and jurisdiction as this may increase the number of people carrying  
243 weapons. Organizations should have an established policy for safe weapon disposition.
- 244 • Social workers should have an established framework and plan for managing disruptive  
245 and violent behaviors in private practice settings, where there are unique vulnerabilities.  
246 Private practice social workers often work alone, often at night or on the weekends. In

247 such cases, social workers should plan and implement safety strategies that are feasible  
248 for the private practice environment.

249 • Consider having secure points of entry to the office setting that are clearly marked by  
250 signs and feature controlled access points and monitoring via working security cameras.

251 These strategies allow staff to carefully monitor who enters and exits a facility and  
252 monitor and record actions that may occur. Depending on the violence prevention data  
253 collected, further interventions can include a single public entrance with other points of  
254 entry restricted to staff only by key or proximity card. Additional strategies include  
255 installing bullet-resistant nonshattering glass and metal detectors or weapon detection  
256 systems to screen for weapons to prevent incidents from occurring. Posting additional  
257 well-trained and vetted personnel at the public entrances can also enhance safety and  
258 deter disruptive behaviors.

259 • Establish and consistently maintain well-lit hallways leading to employees' workspaces  
260 and well-lit parking areas.

261 • Provide secure entrances to employees' workspaces that are separate from public  
262 spaces.

263 • Establish that when social workers use Zoom or another video conferencing platform,  
264 they must display a standardized professional virtual background. Avoid showing  
265 anything related to a social worker's personal life, such as having photos of family  
266 members visible, allowing children or pets to be present during the meeting, or postings  
267 that can indicate the social workers' personal information and location.

268

## 269 **5: Use of Safety Technology**

270 Organizations that employ social workers shall use technology appropriately and effectively to  
271 minimize risk.

272

273 **Interpretation**

274 Social workers increasingly use technology to enhance their professional requirements.  
275 Establishing and maintaining policies and procedures of best practices can mitigate safety  
276 concerns. It is essential to see technology as a tool that can aid in communicating effectively,  
277 facilitate information sharing, and potentially reduce the administrative burden. Consequently,  
278 technology is not a replacement for good clinical care.

279 As social workers, we prioritize ethical use of technology in practice. This is a  
280 significant responsibility that we must conduct with diligence and care. Laws such as the Health  
281 Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act and the Health Information  
282 Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) ensure that social workers use secure treatment  
283 methods, protect clients' confidential clinical records, and coordinate interagency care. This  
284 ethical and secure use of technology is essential to support our clients.

285 Technology is rapidly improving and simultaneously complicating the field of social work.  
286 However, when introduced with clear protocols and training, safety technology can  
287 significantly enhance safety in social work. We must understand these tools' limits and proper  
288 usage. In the scope of social work practices, the safe use of technology should include the  
289 following:

- 290 • Internal alert systems that can be activated from panic buttons in offices.
- 291 • Virtual home visiting using video conferencing, online platforms, or mobile  
292 applications to deliver home-based services remotely. This can reduce exposure to  
293 potential hazards, such as infectious diseases, violence, or environmental risks, while  
294 maintaining the quality and effectiveness of the intervention.
- 295 • Some smart devices, such as watches, glasses, or bracelets, can be worn on the body to  
296 monitor location or activity. They can also alert home visitors or supervisors of health

297 or safety issues like falls, injuries, or stress and provide access to information,  
298 communication, or emergency services.

299 • Mobile phones can allow communication with colleagues, supervisors, or emergency  
300 services in a crisis. They can also access online resources like maps, databases, or  
301 guidelines. Mobile phones should always be charged, accessible, and have adequate  
302 signal coverage. Some mobile phones have features that can enhance safety, such as  
303 GPS tracking, panic buttons, or voice activation. Many now have emergency calls  
304 enabled by tapping the button on the side of the phone five times.

305 • Artificial intelligence (AI) uses computer systems or software to perform tasks that  
306 normally require human intelligence, such as recognition, reasoning, or decision-  
307 making. AI can assist home visitors in various ways, such as screening and assessing  
308 clients, providing feedback and guidance, or detecting and preventing risks. Social  
309 workers should use high clinical scrutiny of screening technology to monitor for  
310 implicit bias and explore HIPAA compliance and automation.

311 • Body cameras that can be attached to clothing or accessories, such as glasses, badges,  
312 or helmets. They can record audio and video of interactions with clients or others in the  
313 field. Body cameras can provide evidence, deter violence, or enhance accountability.  
314 However, they also raise ethical and legal issues like privacy, consent, data protection,  
315 and confidentiality.

316 • Third-party software that allows for interoperability between electronic health records.  
317 Interprofessional collaboration tools are platforms or applications that can facilitate  
318 communication and coordination among different health and social service providers.  
319 They can include secure messaging, video conferencing, electronic health records, or  
320 shared decision-making tools. Interprofessional collaboration tools can improve patient  
321 safety, care quality, and service delivery efficiency.

- 322 • An electronic device that tracks when staff remain in and return from the community  
323 can help home visiting teams account for each other's whereabouts and ensure all staff  
324 have returned safely each day.
- 325 • Internal alert systems that can be activated from key fobs or other mobile devices.
- 326 • Panic buttons that are linked to public safety departments (police, emergency rooms,  
327 fire departments).
- 328 • Mobile safety devices that may incorporate GPS and/or audio or video recording.
- 329 • Personal safety devices (for example, silent panic buttons, identification card holder  
330 with audio monitoring).
- 331 • Security cameras where appropriate, implemented with carefully written standard  
332 operating protocols and policies.

333

334 Clients and staff must be informed about the use of safety technology, particularly if audio  
335 or video recording is involved. Although clients need not be informed about the location of  
336 internal alert systems, knowing that safety technology is in use may deter violent behavior.  
337 However, technology should never be used to intimidate or coerce clients or staff. Safety  
338 technology should not be used punitively to “spy” on social workers or to provide undetected  
339 supervision without their knowledge. Protocols and standard operating procedures should  
340 accompany safety technology and be practiced and tested regularly. Back-up plans should be  
341 made in the event that safety technology fails. All clients and staff should be thoroughly trained  
342 and supported in learning to use new technology.

343

#### 344 **6: Provision of Mobile Phones for Safety**

345 Social workers shall be equipped with working mobile phones as essential tools to enhance  
346 safety when working in the community. Mobile phones can provide immediate communication

347 access in case of emergencies, allow real-time coordination with supervisors and colleagues,  
348 and serve as a link to external support services when working in unpredictable or high-risk  
349 environments.

350

### 351 **Interpretation**

352 Mobile phones have evolved into a critical resource for social workers performing duties  
353 outside the office. In addition to offering communication benefits, mobile phones can serve as  
354 tools for navigating unfamiliar locations, ensuring quick access to emergency services, and  
355 allowing for constant communication with supervisory staff. However, the use of mobile  
356 phones must be carefully managed to protect the social worker's privacy and to avoid  
357 escalation of potentially volatile situations.

358

### 359 Use of Agency-Issued Mobile Phones

360 Social workers shall use agency-issued phones, rather than personal devices, to protect their  
361 privacy and prevent exposure of personal contact information. Using agency-issued phones  
362 ensures that social workers' personal details, including phone numbers and GPS data, are kept  
363 confidential and not accessible to clients or third parties. Additionally, agency phones can be  
364 equipped with relevant security features and preinstalled safety apps to meet specific  
365 organizational standards for work within the community.

366

### 367 Maintaining Professional Boundaries

368 Mobile phones, while facilitating communication, can also blur boundaries between  
369 professional and personal life. Social workers should be mindful of maintaining professional  
370 boundaries when using mobile devices and avoid sharing personal contact information with  
371 clients. Using agency-provided mobile phones reinforces these boundaries, helping to separate

372 personal and professional spheres while reducing risks such as unwanted after-hours contact.  
373 Agencies providing mobile phones should also have a policy clearly delineating professional  
374 boundaries and expectations for social workers' responses and their reporting of disruptive  
375 behavior, including both voice and text.

376

### 377 Risk of Escalating Aggressive Situations

378 While mobile phones are invaluable for communication, they can also inadvertently escalate  
379 aggression in tense or volatile situations. This may occur when a social worker uses a  
380 smartphone instead of engaging in face-to-face communication with a client. Social workers  
381 should be trained to recognize when the use of a mobile phone may heighten conflict or provoke  
382 agitation. In such cases, discretion is key. Social workers should be mindful of their  
383 environment, avoid uncomfortable or dangerous scenarios whenever possible, use  
384 nonthreatening body language, and avoid visibly or audibly using their phones during  
385 confrontational high-risk scenarios, unless it is necessary for personal safety including getting  
386 to a place of safety as defined by the social worker.

387

### 388 Safe and Responsible Use of Mobile Phones

389 To maximize safety, social workers should observe the following practices when using mobile  
390 phones when working in the community:

- 391 • **Emergency Preparedness:** Keep phones fully charged and have spare batteries,  
392 charging cords, car chargers, and external portable chargers readily available to ensure  
393 uninterrupted communication, particularly in rural or low-coverage areas.
- 394 • **Know Your Device:** Social workers should be fully trained on how to operate their  
395 mobile phones, including emergency features such as speed dialing, location sharing,  
396 and voice-activated commands.

- 397       • **Limitations of Technology:** Understand the limitations of mobile phone service in  
398       areas with low or no cell reception or internet coverage, and always have an alternative  
399       communication plan in place, such as using two-way radios or prearranged check-in  
400       protocols.
- 401       • **GPS and Location Services:** Social workers should enable GPS and location-sharing  
402       services on agency-issued phones, allowing supervisors or emergency services to track  
403       their location when working alone in the community.
- 404       • **Privacy Considerations:** When using mobile phones, social workers must remain  
405       mindful of confidentiality and avoid discussing sensitive information in public settings  
406       or over unsecured phone lines.

407

#### 408 Crisis Communication Protocols

409 Social workers should receive specific training on how to use mobile phones as part of a  
410 broader crisis communication strategy. This includes the use of code words or predetermined  
411 phrases that can discreetly alert colleagues or supervisors of dangerous or threatening  
412 situations. Organizations, administrators, managers, and supervisors must have protocols in  
413 place for responding quickly when such alerts occur.

414

#### 415 Legal and Ethical Responsibilities

416 Social workers must comply with legal and ethical guidelines regarding the use of mobile  
417 phones in the workplace. This includes adhering to confidentiality requirements under HIPAA  
418 or other relevant privacy laws, as well as state or agency regulations that prohibit texting or  
419 using handheld devices while driving. Social workers should use hands-free devices whenever  
420 possible and avoid engaging in conversations that might compromise client confidentiality or  
421 distract from safe driving practices.

422

423 Best Practices for De-escalation

424 In instances where the presence of a mobile phone might escalate an already tense situation,  
425 social workers should prioritize nonverbal communication, active listening, and de-escalation  
426 techniques. The phone should only be used discreetly and judiciously in these settings to  
427 prevent aggravating a client's anxiety or hostility. If the social worker feels unsafe, they should  
428 attempt to leave the situation, retreat to a safer location, and immediately use the phone to call  
429 for help.

430

431 **7. Risk Assessment for Community-Based Visits**

432 Social workers shall assess and take proactive steps to mitigate the risk of experiencing  
433 violence prior to each visit in the community.

434

435 **Interpretation**

436 Social workers who conduct home visits or meet clients in the community may be subjected to  
437 a range of safety risks. Prior to each visit in the community, social workers should conduct a  
438 risk assessment that includes the following:

439 Assessment of environmental factors:

- 440 • Does the social worker have a complete and exact address of the visit, to avoid  
441 appearing lost or confused?
- 442 • Does the neighborhood present any concerns or risks for violence?
- 443 • Is the visit scheduled at a time of day that is riskier, such as evening or late hours?
- 444 • Are there other factors that may pose a risk for violence or danger (e.g., weather or  
445 disaster conditions, extreme heat or cold, icy roads)?

- 446 • Have any events occurred in the neighborhood that might indicate increased risk (e.g.,  
447 homicides, abductions, robberies, increased law enforcement activities)?
- 448 • Does the area have reduced reception for mobile devices (for example, tunnels,  
449 mountains, rural areas)?
- 450 • Will the identification of the social worker's agency (for example, vehicle logo)  
451 increase the risk?
- 452 • Are there groups or individuals in the path to the home or near the location of the visit?  
453

454 Assessment of client's living space:

- 455 • Does accessing the space require the use of an elevator or flights of stairs?
- 456 • Are common spaces well-lit and clean?
- 457 • Are exits easily accessible?
- 458 • Who is likely to be in the client's home during the visit? This could include children,  
459 parents, other relatives or friends, pets, and secured guard dogs.
- 460 • Is the client or their family members or friends known to engage in criminal or  
461 dangerous activities in the home?
- 462 • Is there an increased risk of disease, infection, or pests in the home environment?
- 463 • Are the client's family or social supports known to have weapons? If so, are they willing  
464 to secure weapons? Organizations must have a written standard operating procedure to  
465 address this issue.

466

467 Assessment of proposed work activities:

- 468 • Will the social worker engage in high-risk activities during the visit (for example,  
469 removing a child, notifying of a reduction in benefits, terminating parental rights,

470 executing a civil commitment procedure, helping a domestic violence victim to a safe  
471 house, delivering other potentially unwelcome information)?

- 472 • Assessment of increased risk due to client's condition:
- 473 • Does the client have untreated conditions causing behavioral health disturbances?
- 474 • Does the client have a history of violence or agitated disruptive or threatening behavior?
- 475 • Does the client have any type of communicable disease?

476

477 Assessment of worker vulnerability:

- 478 • Is the social worker assigned to work alone or in a single-staffed setting?
- 479 • Does the social worker have any limiting physical condition(s) that may increase  
480 vulnerability?
- 481 • Does the social worker have experience in the role?
- 482 • Does the social worker demonstrate appropriate situational awareness and ability to  
483 seek supportive guidance and assistance?
- 484 • Is the social worker's attire suited to the environment, or does it place them at greater  
485 risk?
- 486 • Is the social worker displaying sensitive messaging that is consistent with neutral  
487 professional demeanor?
- 488 • Does the worker have a clear, actionable safety plan in place?
- 489 • Has the equipment been inspected for safety and is it in reliable working condition? If  
490 not in good working order, do not use.

491

492 Recommended safety planning steps:

- 493 • Verify the social worker's vehicle is in good repair and working condition.

- 494 • Verify the social worker's mobile device is fully charged.
- 495 • Verify that ancillary communication devices, such as a two-way radio, are working.
- 496 • Have emergency telephone numbers available both in a hard copy and saved on the  
497 mobile phone.
- 498 • Conduct an open, direct, and formal discussion concerning community safety with the  
499 client and family, either as a mutual safety contract or informally as a discussion of  
500 mutual safety, setting clear expectations.
- 501 • Social workers should be well trained in the use of their agency's risk assessment  
502 instrument and participate in continuing supervision to ensure consistency in practice.
- 503 • When a risk is identified, a safety plan should be implemented and adapted as necessary  
504 throughout case planning. Address the risk to reduce and/or minimize the risk and  
505 increase protective factors.
- 506 • When the risk is determined to be too great or is unable to be minimized using normal  
507 precautions, the social worker should have the opportunity, with administrative and  
508 management support, to state their concerns and develop an alternative plan and  
509 continually assess until the risk is minimized by changed conditions or when  
510 appropriate support is available. The appropriate support may include being  
511 accompanied by a colleague, supervisor, or law enforcement; changing the day or time  
512 of the visit; changing the site of the visit to a safer venue; or postponing the visit.

513

## 514 **8. Transporting Clients**

515 Social workers shall acknowledge specific safety concerns when transporting clients.

516

## 517 **Interpretation**

518 When preparing to transport clients, organizations should establish policies and practices that  
519 are attentive to the safety and security of employees, social workers, clients, and employer.

520 Policies and practices should include the expectations that the social worker should

- 521 • Assess the client's mood.
- 522 • Communicate engagement purpose.
- 523 • Inquire about weapon possession.
- 524 • Assess visual and verbal cues for safety risk.
- 525 • Ensure their phone is charged and in their vehicle.
- 526 • Screen for communicable infection control concerns or infestations present in the  
527 client's home prior to transport.
- 528 • Prior to leaving for client engagement in the community, assess vehicle conditions  
529 internally and externally, including
  - 530 ○ Verify the safety features of the motor vehicle are working (including turn signals,  
531 lights, windshield wipers, brakes, tires, and seatbelts) and verify the motor vehicle  
532 is fully fueled or fully charged prior to transport and fueled or charged prior to  
533 turning in the motor vehicle.
  - 534 ○ Verify the motor vehicle is equipped with proper safety equipment in case of an  
535 emergency (e.g., roadside safety kit, fire extinguisher, first aid kit, charger adapter,  
536 spare tire).
  - 537 ○ Verify the vehicle interior is free of potential contraband and/or weapons (e.g., pen;  
538 combs; tools, etc.).
  - 539 ○ Implement a buddy system, such as having a second social worker in the vehicle or  
540 an in-vehicle camera, and/or an identified coworker to contact upon arrival and  
541 when a client exits the vehicle.

542 When transporting an infant/toddler and/or child, the social worker should

- 543 • Know proper use and installation of a child safety seat, appropriate for the child's age  
544 and size.
- 545 • Ensure the child/client has a seat belt that is fastened before starting transport.
- 546 • Implement a buddy system, such as having a second social worker in the vehicle or an  
547 in-vehicle camera, and/or an identified coworker to contact upon arrival and when a  
548 child exits their vehicle.

549

550 If a client is assessed to be unsafe to transport based on professional judgement, or the  
551 motor vehicle is assessed unsafe to operate, an organization's policy should reflect that the  
552 social worker will not transport a client or operate the motor vehicle. Organizational policies  
553 should restrict the transportation of clients when a client is determined to be unsafe to transport  
554 or if a vehicle is determined unsafe to operate on a roadway.

555

## 556 **9. Creating Safe Reporting Practices in All Workplace Settings**

557 Social workers shall consistently engage in continued and comprehensive safety practices and  
558 processes to enhance workplace safety during all encounters with clients.

559

### 560 **Interpretation**

561 Social workers providing services in any setting should ensure that their supportive  
562 infrastructure (support staff, coworkers, supervisors, and managers) is aware of their  
563 whereabouts and plans for the workday and week. This framework must be maintained in a  
564 secure location, accessible only by staff on a need-to-know basis.

565

566 Social workers in a clinic, office, or hospital-based based setting should

- 567 • Consistently use an established sign-in and sign-out practice and policy.

- 568 • Provide information about the clients being served, including potential safety issues,  
569 specifically environmental issues and other people present.
- 570 • Indicate the length of each visit including location (estimated arrival and departure  
571 times) and who will be present.
- 572 • Indicate the need for any further preventative staff assistance or an alternative location.
- 573 • Social workers may always choose to stop or decline an assignment based on safety  
574 considerations and reengage later with alternative arrangements.
- 575 • Social workers may always stop or decline an appointment based on time constraints,  
576 environmental constraints, and/or case complexities.
- 577 • In the event social workers experience a disruptive event they should get to a safe space  
578 and then activate emergency services by any means.
- 579
- 580 Social workers providing services in the community should
- 581 • Consistently use an established sign-in and sign-out practice and policy.
- 582 • Provide addresses of visit and appointment times in the order they are scheduled.
- 583 • Provide information about the clients being visited, including potential safety issues,  
584 specifically environmental issues and other persons present.
- 585 • Indicate the length of each visit (estimated arrival and departure times)
- 586 • For any change in schedule, contact supportive infrastructure with changes to update  
587 schedule.
- 588 •
- 589 • In all circumstances, staff must indicate the best and most consistent way for  
590 communication, i.e., cellular or any other means.

- 591 • Staff must always provide information on the modes of transportation used (public  
592 transportation; car service; motor vehicle type, make, model, and license number; plane,  
593 etc.).
- 594 • At all times, staff must carry and present the agency with current identification.
- 595 • Indicate the need for any further preventative staff assistance or an alternative location.
- 596 • Social workers may always choose to stop or decline an assignment based on safety  
597 considerations and reengage later with alternative arrangements.
- 598 • In the event social workers experience a disruptive event social workers should get to  
599 a safe space and then activate emergency services by any means.
- 600 • For any staff who do not check in, support infrastructure should immediately initiate a  
601 community alert and search process. If staff are not located, law enforcement should be  
602 notified and search until the social worker is located.

603

## 604 **10. Post-Incident Reporting and Response**

605 Organizations employing social workers shall develop policies and protocols following a  
606 disruptive, disorderly, violent, or abusive incident.

607

### 608 **Interpretation**

609 Despite an organization's best intentions, every disruptive, disorderly, violent, or abusive  
610 incident cannot be anticipated or avoided. However, social work employers possess an  
611 obligation to develop and regularly maintain policies and protocols that continually assess, and  
612 when indicated, intervene after a disruptive, disorderly, violent, or abusive incident. Written  
613 policies and procedures must consistently seek to address and ameliorate the current survivor's  
614 condition and serve to inform an organization's employees of any policy and/or procedural  
615 means to prevent and avoid future incidents. Policies and protocols can include the following:

- 616 • Providing prompt assistance to the social worker(s).
- 617 • Immediately providing social worker(s) with referrals to mental health assistance  
618 (Employee Assistance Program or insurance), workers' compensation information, and  
619 emergency medical services.
- 620 • Assessing medical needs and obtaining prompt medical assistance at the expense of the  
621 organization.
- 622 • Holding psychological and operational debriefings with affected employees. Issues for  
623 the organization and the social worker involved in the incident to consider for  
624 operational debriefings may include
  - 625 ○ How could this have been prevented?
  - 626 ○ Are new policies or procedures necessary?
  - 627 ○ What could have been done differently?
  - 628 ○ What helped with safety and decreased risk?
  - 629 ○ What increased risk of danger?
- 630 • Giving all staff involved access to complete an incident report that at minimum details
  - 631 ○ a brief description of the incident: where the incident occurred, when the incident  
632 occurred (date and time);
  - 633 ○ who was the primary disruptor, who were the primary experiencers, who was  
634 present/involved in the incident;
  - 635 ○ a description of injuries, identification of factors contributing to the incident,  
636 whether medical services were advised and/or accessed and injuries experienced by  
637 the disruptor.
- 638 • Organizations must note that reports may be delayed, disruptive events are typically  
639 underreported and that multiple reports may be entered after a disruptive event.

- 640       • Develop and continually revise employee safety plans after an incident until the  
641       incident is resolved. This may take many months depending on the severity of the  
642       incident. A primary point of contact should be assigned to support experiencing  
643       employees.
- 644       • All members of the organization must work collaboratively to openly review the  
645       incident and make recommendations to safely intervene with clients and experiencers  
646       of the incident to successfully prevent future incidents. This may include
- 647           ○ Addressing the short/long-term caseload distribution of the affected social  
648           worker.
  - 649           ○ Offering technical and legal assistance, as needed.
  - 650           ○ Providing financial compensation for damage to property.
  - 651           ○ Offering voluntary referrals to Employee Assistance Program services.
  - 652           ○ Following up on safety plan implementation.
  - 653           ○ Crafting and implementing an ongoing quality assurance review of relevant  
654           policies and procedures.

655

## 656 **11. Safety Training**

657 Social workers shall participate in regular training (and case supervision as needed) that  
658 develops and maintains and enhances their ability to safely practice.

659

### 660 **Interpretation**

661 Safety training should include skill building in risk assessment, risk management, risk  
662 reduction, verbal interventions, and personal safety skills. Safety training should minimally  
663 include the following topics:

- 664 • How and why client aggression and violence are a pressing issue across all spheres of  
665 social work practice.
- 666 • How to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the risk factors associated with  
667 violent and aggressive behavior and how to consistently, proactively, and safely address  
668 these behaviors.
- 669 • How to implement the best evidence-based practices for both conducting a client risk  
670 assessment and best addressing client aggression and violence.
- 671 • How to employ the critical role of empathy and crisis communication skills when  
672 working with clients who demonstrate disruptive, agitated, or violent behaviors; and  
673 how to consistently support clients and apply the strengths perspective when de-  
674 escalating disruptive, angry, and aggressive behavior.
- 675 • How to effectively approach, engage, and intervene with disruptive, angry, agitated,  
676 and aggressive clients including those who are legally or socially involved while  
677 maintaining one's safety.
- 678 • How to approach, engage, and establish rapport with a disruptive, disorderly, angry,  
679 agitated, or aggressive client and how to choose a safe interviewing environment or  
680 other safe engagement strategies.
- 681 • How to use best practices for verbal de-escalation techniques, including limit setting.
- 682 • How to apply knowledge and skills related to intervention strategies that can be  
683 effective in treating violent clients and reducing their risk for future violence.
- 684 • How to use strategies for managing ongoing threat assessments.
- 685 • How to execute strategies for preventing and managing clients exhibiting disruptive  
686 and violent behaviors, specifically in the office setting.

- 687 • How to employ strategies for preventing and dealing with clients exhibiting disruptive  
688 and violent behaviors, specifically in the community including home visits and services  
689 provided in nontraditional settings.
- 690 • How to use physical techniques that can help improve personal safety skills, including  
691 exercises for breathing and centering.
- 692 • How to execute personal protection skills emphasizing escape and evading techniques.
- 693 • How to maintain legal and ethical protocols when supporting clients with acute and  
694 imminent potential for violence.
- 695 • How to maintain specialized knowledge of legal and forensic issues when working with  
696 violent clients, including how to manage and initiate Tarasoff (duty to warn)  
697 requirements, when and how to initiate involuntary civil commitment proceedings, etc.
- 698 • How to apply individual and organizational self-care strategies to enhance safety,  
699 prevent burnout, and manage trauma reactions and symptomatology.

700

## 701 **12: Student Safety**

702 Social workers shall be prepared for psychologically and physically safe social work practice  
703 during their student years.

704

### 705 **Interpretation**

706 As practicum experiences are an important part of the social work curriculum, schools of social  
707 work are responsible for ensuring that social work students are educated about concepts and  
708 techniques related to psychological and physical safety as well as consistent supervision in safe  
709 environments. Social work safety should be part of the curriculum and training of field  
710 practicum instructors. Schools should place students in settings with sound safety policies and  
711 procedures that should be reviewed with students in school and in the placement setting.

712 Professional safety should be part of school and agency orientations. Students who have safety  
713 concerns about their placements must be provided with support until the safety concerns have  
714 abated. If the concerns cannot be adequately addressed, the student must be offered an  
715 alternative placement.

716 NASW recognizes the critical importance of ensuring social work students' safety  
717 during their education and emphasizes the responsibility of social work programs to integrate  
718 comprehensive safety education into their curricula, preparing students to navigate diverse  
719 professional environments effectively and responsibly.

720

### 721 **Integration of Safety Training into the Curriculum**

722 Social work programs must incorporate safety training throughout the curriculum to equip  
723 students with essential skills for protecting themselves and others. This includes

- 724 • **Collaboration with Practicum Instructors and Field Supervisors:** These  
725 professionals play a vital role in guiding and supervising students, ensuring the  
726 application of safety protocols.
- 727 • **Agency Partnerships:** Schools must collaborate with agencies that uphold robust  
728 safety policies and review these policies with students and agency to foster  
729 preparedness and trust.
- 730 • **Support Mechanisms:** In the event of safety concerns, schools must provide timely  
731 and appropriate support, including alternative placements and therapy when necessary,  
732 to safeguard students' well-being.

733

### 734 **Role of Practicum Instructors and Field Agency Supervisors**

735 Practicum instructors and field agency supervisors must

- 736 • Make onsite visits assessing workplace safety prior to student assignment.

- 737       • Receive thorough training on safety protocols, risk management, and de-escalation  
738       techniques tailored to student experiences.
- 739       • Provide consistent, well-documented supervision that prioritizes safety.
- 740       • Offer immediate support and guidance to students facing safety challenges in the  
741       community.

742

### 743 **Addressing Safety Concerns**

744 Programs must establish clear, documented processes for addressing safety concerns. This  
745 includes

- 746       • Prompt action to support affected students, including reassignment to alternative  
747       placements when necessary.
- 748       • Maintaining open lines of communication with students to address and mitigate risks  
749       effectively.

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