# NASW Guidelines for Social Worker Safety in the Workplace

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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). Within the past decade, the United States experienced major shifts in the socioeconomic landscape leading to an increase in the number of people unable to meet their basic human needs without receiving financial augmentation through a formal social assistance entitlement. The compounded nature of these shifts in the socioeconomic landscape can contribute to a mercurial influence on social workers’ practice settings as more people require social work services and more people grapple with major lifestyle changes and constrained resources.

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 to 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 (BLS, 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:

**Acknowledgement 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. And, 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 (e.g., child welfare, 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.

**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 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 (e.g., law
enforcement accompanies social workers when involuntarily removing a child from parents) 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 curricula 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

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/or 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:

- Developing Safety Policies that:
  - provides 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, co-workers 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.
- Establishing a Safety Committee that:
o assures 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.

o assures that safety protocols that are instituted, updated, and practiced regularly.

o identifies and investigates physical measures and technology that contribute to and promote the safety of social work staff.

o provides ongoing proactive risk assessment that identifies line staff at risk for violence, high risk 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 & Reporting Activities that:
  
o 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.
  
o develop 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 develops strategies for managing them via case consultations, training and education, and in policy development.

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 (e.g., verbal threat/abuse, intimidation, attempted or actual physical assault, property damage, stalking)
- Severity of the incident (costs to the physical and psychological health and well-being of persons or organizations)
  - Physical Health (bodily physical harm)
  - Mental Health (psychological and emotional harm/toll/impact)
  - Financial (monetary costs to property, persons 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

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 (e.g., stapler, paper weights, scissors, molded plastic chairs or office décor that can be picked up and thrown etc.)
• Secure entry and access (e.g., monitored, restricted access security guard, metal detector screening, bullet-proof glass)
• Well-lit hallways that lead to employees' workspaces
• Where possible, secure entrances to the employees’ workspaces that are separate from public spaces
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 to 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 employ 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:

- 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 depts.)
• Mobile safety devices that may incorporate GPS and/or audio/video recording

• Personal safety devices (e.g., silent panic buttons, identification card holder with audio monitoring)

• Use of 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, coerce or blackmail clients or staff. Safety technology should not be used to “spy” on staff or to provide undetected supervision without the staff member’s knowledge.

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. Ways to increase the safety provided by a mobile phone include:

• The mobile phone should be kept fully charged and a replacement battery should be on hand for emergencies, and have a charger in the car

• Be familiar with limitations of cell phone coverage in areas where the worker may visit
• Social workers should ensure that they know how to use the phone properly before going into the field

• Emergency contacts should be kept on speed dial

• GPS-enabled mobile phone applications should be activated at all times while in the field

• “Code” words or phrases should be agreed on and used to help the social worker convey the nature of the threat to their managers or colleagues

• Hand held mobile phones should not be used while driving

• Texting instead of calling; but not while driving

• The phone should be used discreetly, so as not to inadvertently escalate a potentially volatile situation and to avoid becoming a possible target for robbery.

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:

• Assessment of environmental factors
  
  o Does the worker have a complete and exact address of the visit, to avoid appearing lost or confused?
  
  o Does the neighborhood pose risks for violence?
  
  o 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? (homicides, abductions, robberies, drug raids, etc.)

• Does the area have reduced reception for mobile devices (tunnels, rural areas, etc.)

• Will identification of the social worker’s agency (vehicle logo, etc.) 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?
  
  • 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
  
o Will the social worker engage in high-risk activities during the visit? (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, etc.)

• Assessment of increased risk due to client’s condition
  
o Active substance abuse, particularly alcohol
  
o Mental illness or personality disorder, particularly if untreated
  
o History of recent and/or frequent violence or threatening behavior
  
o Communicable disease

• Assessment of worker vulnerability
  
o Working alone
  
o Visible physical conditions that may increase vulnerability (pregnancy, disabilities, use of cane or walking aid)
  
o Lack of experience
  
o Appearing timid, vulnerable, lost or confused
  
o Attire (wearing jewelry and other valuables, high-heeled shoes, etc) that adds to vulnerability
  
o Accessories (political buttons, religious jewelry) that may trigger reactions
  
o Appearance (e.g., tattoos, body piercings) that cannot be covered and that might attract/increase attention
  
o Lack of a safety plan
• Assessment of condition of emergency equipment that may be needed
  o Vehicle in good repair and working condition
  o Mobile device, fully charged
  o Emergency telephone numbers

• Discuss 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 assure 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 their concerns and develop an alternative to minimize the danger 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.

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 social worker should also assess the condition of the vehicle:

• Is the interior of the vehicle free from potential weapons?

• Is the vehicle in good working condition (e.g., ample gas, working brakes, headlights/tail lights)?

• Is the vehicle equipped with proper safety equipment in case of an emergency (e.g., 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

• If possible, utilize a “buddy system” to have a second social worker in the vehicle when transporting a client.

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

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, co-worker) 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 and call into office after leaving each appointment
- 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 (e.g., if a visit or appointment is canceled or delayed)
- provide information on how to reach them (e.g., cell phone)
- when visiting any client, social worker(s) to report back to their supervisor or designated agency representative when the meeting is concluded or as soon as it is safe to do so
- carry agency identification cards at all times

Following each visit, the social workers should 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 assure his/her safety. If normal contact cannot be made with the social worker in the field, agencies should develop policies about when law enforcement is called.
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 as well as to avoid future incidents. The protocols can include:

- Providing prompt assistance to the employee
- Assessing medical need and obtaining medical assistance
- Debriefing with staff and witnesses
- Completing an incident report
- Developing a safety plan in response to the incident
- Intervening with other clients and observers of the incident
- Addressing the caseload distribution of affected social worker
- Offering technical and legal assistance as needed
- Providing financial compensation for damage to property
- Offering voluntary referrals to EAP services
- Following-up on safety plan
- Implementing a quality assurance review of policies and procedures
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 non-violent 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.

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 that have sound safety policies, and these policies and procedures 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 abated, the student must be offered an alternative placement.