Safety Tips for Home Visitors

Texas Home Visiting Program

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General Safety

The Texas Home Visiting Program team wants to ensure that the personal safety of home visitors and other staff is a priority in everyone’s mind. The following guidelines are intended to be used when making a home visit and when determining whether or not it is safe to make a home visit. Additionally, this booklet provides guidelines for agency administrators and supervisors to consider when developing safety-related policies and procedures. Use these guidelines – and each staff member’s own experience and good sense – when discussing an agency safety plan and when thinking of a personal safety plan to keep in mind. Staff members will be working alone in a variety of settings, including in high crime areas, in rural/remote or unfamiliar locations, and with vulnerable or stressed populations. Safety is extremely important. In all situations, we encourage staff to use good sense and intuition; a visit can always be rescheduled but your health and life are irreplaceable.

If you believe that your safety or anyone else’s safety in the home may be at risk, remember:

- Immediately
  - Leave the home
  - Call 911 or the local emergency number
  - If children are in danger, notify the local law enforcement office and Child Protective Services (CPS) by calling the Abuse Hotline toll-free 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, nationwide at 1-800-252-5400.
- As soon as possible
  - Call and consult with your supervisor
  - Contact the family if you are able to safely and determine if everyone is safe. Assure the client and family that you will continue to work with them if possible and appropriate within the guidelines of your program.
- Within a couple of days
  - Debrief or reflect on the situation with your supervisor once back in the office to learn how to handle similar situations in the future.

During a telephone conversation if you believe someone in the home is in danger:

- Get as much information as possible about their location
- Tell the individual that you will call 911 or other emergency services, unless doing so would further put the individual in danger or cause them to hang up. Try and keep the person on the line by using another phone to call emergency services or asking someone else to call.

But, remember... MOST home visitors work with families without any unsafe incidents. Clients are usually welcoming, protective and have strong relationships with their home visitors. It is wise to expect the best from people, but be alert and careful wherever you go.
Team Techniques: Planning for Safety

Communication

Create a check-in system so the supervisor knows where home visitors are supposed to be throughout the day as well as when they have finished their day’s work and returned home safely. If a home visitor lives alone, it is particularly important that s/he communicates her/his whereabouts at the end of the day.

Some ways of doing this include:

- A check-in/out board
- Checking in at end of day by phone/email/text message
- Entering schedules on a shared calendar or calendar program (Outlook, Google, etc.)
- Let supervisor know if there are changes to the daily schedule

Home visitors must ensure supervisors know the current phone number(s) where they can be reached. If the supervisor will be out of the office, assign another staff member to take emergency calls and inform home visitors. Creating emergency codes that can be texted or phoned-in if something goes wrong can help in serious and delicate situations where saying too much might create more danger. Home visitors can also prepare an excuse in advance if they feel the need to leave a home or situation quickly without explaining why.

Team Member Roles

Supervisors can support home visitor safety with the following:

- Establish the expectation that home visitors share information on appointments and their locations as well as changes to the schedule
- In turn, share your schedule with home visitors and appoint someone to take emergency calls when you are unavailable
- Create an agency policy regarding uniforms and/or proper identification

Some considerations about uniforms and nametags:

- Wearing a uniform (e.g., a shirt with your organization/program’s logo on it or scrubs) can identify you as a program staff member; this may improve safety or be risky based on the communities you visit. Discuss this and create a team plan.
- Always wearing a clip-on name badge with your first name and organization on it is recommended; badges that hang around the neck are not recommended
- Wear clothing and shoes that are washable and easy to move in (pants, rubber sole shoes, etc.)
- Avoid wearing expensive-looking jewelry or carrying valuables
- If you use a business card or paperwork that include your last name, leave these only if you feel it is safe to do so
Agency administrators can support home visitor safety with the following:

- Be supportive of safety plans and guidelines created by supervisors and home visitors and reinforce a culture of safety throughout the agency
- Arranging training and classes for all home visiting staff (personal safety, de-escalation techniques, and self-defense); these may be available through your local police department
- Secure funding for GPS systems, cell phones, car chargers for cell phones, identification badges, uniforms (as appropriate), etc. to support the safety of the home visitors
- Arrange for security personal and/or well-lit parking locations at the office
- Keep home visitor information on file in case of emergency (a recent photograph, emergency contacts, and vehicle information)

Home visitors can play an active role in their own safety by collaborating with colleagues and supervisors to discuss these issues, create plans, update supervisors about daily schedules, attend training classes, and follow agency protocol.

**Professional Boundaries and Behavior**

Professional boundaries are key. Home visitors can prevent many safety issues by having solid boundaries at all times and by staying professional, confident, and calm even in an escalating situation.

Some things to remember are:

- Be careful about how much you tell a client about yourself and personal information you share
- Share only the contact information necessary to do your job; do not share personal email, home address, or phone numbers you do not use for work purposes
- Do not get into a client’s car and do not allow a client to get into your car
- Do not loan or give money to a client; do not borrow or take money from a client
- Do not purchase or sell anything to a client
- Decide with your team or create a consistent personal policy about accepting food or not
- Bring a bottle of water to politely avoid a family offering you a drink until you are comfortable
- Be aware of cultural differences that may exist in a family (regarding offering food, habits, etc.)

Attention to your behavior and attitudes can improve safety – and strengthen your relationship with clients and their loved ones. It is a good idea to act or react in the following ways:

- Business-like
- Professional
- Calm
- Confident
- Observant
- In control
- Kind
- Respectful
- Compassionate
- Courteous

Treating clients with respect protects their dignity. If a client feels threatened s/he may become aggressive or defensive. Remember you are a guest in someone else’s home.
Safety in the Field

In the Neighborhood and Outside the Home
While it is difficult to know what the safety risks are in ANY neighborhood and violence can happen anywhere, you can be prepared by staying alert and aware of your surroundings.

Your Car: Driving, Parking, and Upkeep
Since you will be in your car often, in all types of weather and conditions, keep the following in mind:

- Have plenty of gas in case you get lost or have to drive further than anticipated; have a spare tire and towing/service station information
- Lock your doors while driving or parked; roll up windows if you feel unsafe
- Park in well-lit areas close to public areas when possible
- Park in full view of a client’s home, not in alleys or deserted side streets
- Do not park in a driveway, and park so that you can drive away easily
- Prepare for weather and health emergencies, especially in rural areas
  - Consider having handy: water, snacks, ice scraper, shovel, flashlight, blanket, maps, first aid kit, plastic bags, disinfectant wipes/hand cleaner, & latex gloves (for blood emergencies)
- If your vehicle breaks down, use emergency flashers and stay in your car if you feel unsafe
- Know your route home and where you are in case you need to explain it
- If another car bumps you from behind or tries to get you to pull over, do not stop on the roadway or shoulder. Drive to the nearest public area and call the police. Know the area and places of safety, (businesses, shops, service stations, fire stations, police departments)
- Do not stop for flashing white lights; lights on U.S. emergency vehicles are red or red and blue
- If someone on the road indicates they need help, do not stop. Call 911 from a cell phone and make the police aware of the situation
- If you are lost and do not have a GPS system, go to a lighted public area for help/to read a map
- If you have an accident and there is damage to your car, call the police to file a police report. Always have your car insurance handy
- Do not drive in bad weather if you feel unsafe; reschedule appointments

Planning Visits with Clients
Be sure clients know when to expect you and are prepared for your visit as follows:

- If another staff member has served the family, ask about any crises or special circumstances in the home; also consult client files.
- If you have the option, visit clients while it is light outside
- Let clients know when to expect and watch out for you. They can let you know when it is/is not safe to enter a neighborhood.
  - Give a reminder call/message with a callback number
- When visiting after dark, carry a flashlight and extra batteries
- Ask clients to lock up dangerous animals
- If a client is sick, consider rescheduling so you do not spread germs
Approaching a House

Walk to a client’s home, in a professional, business-like manner, consider:

- Keep your keys in hand as they can be an effective weapon if needed
- Only carry absolute necessities into the home (chart/paperwork, supplies, keys). Lock valuables in your trunk/glove box. Lock the car.
- Use caution when passing by tall shrubs/bushes or groups of people
- If approached by someone, be brief and keep moving. Don’t be too friendly or rude enough to make them angry. Wear a blank, firm expression. If the person insists on talking or starts to follow you and you feel you’re in danger, yell loudly for help.
- In a rural area, you may want to open and slam your car door before getting out to alert animals

Do not enter the yard or home when:

- Parent or others are intoxicated, violent, or acting in an unusual way
- There is no quick escape
- Vicious animals are present

Approaching an Apartment

Apartment hallways, stairwells, and elevators may present additional risks, consider:

- Do not enter the area if any person or group that seems threatening is loitering there
- Call and ask the client to come out to the entrance and meet you, escorting you in or out of the building as needed

Entering a Client’s Home

Common sense approaches to entering a client’s home are useful:

- Go to the door in plain sight of the street
- Knock or ring the bell
- Do not enter unless invited in by the client or a family member you’re familiar with. If someone refuses to let you in, do not try to persuade them otherwise. Leave the situation and consult with your supervisor and, later, call the client to discuss. There may be a good reason (an abusive partner has arrived, etc.)
- If an unknown caregiver is present, inform them you will reschedule the visit
- If a client is sick, consider rescheduling so you do not spread germs to other families
- If children who cannot care for themselves appear to be alone, do not enter. Call the CPS Abuse Hotline toll-free 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, nationwide at 1-800-252-5400

Trust Your Gut!

Be alert and watchful of what is happening around you. Trust those little hairs on the back of your neck. If something feels wrong or unsafe, leave the situation and notify your supervisor and possibly local police. Your instincts are better than any guidelines can ever be.
Leaving a Client’s Home
Simple preparation steps can make you safer when leaving a home:

- Use common walkways and avoid isolated stairs
- Have keys ready when entering your car; searching through a tote/purse can waste time and increase risk
- Check the backseat before getting in

Remember to document if an incident occurs (especially if you are injured). Use an agency incident report if one exists. Inform your supervisor of serious incidents, following your team’s safety protocols.

Inside a Client’s Home
Upon entering, be observant and notice any unusual behavior. Leave if you feel uncomfortable. Always position yourself with a clear exit route (direct access to a door or window) so you cannot be cornered.

In particular:

- Be aware of rooms in the home that the client and family are very protective of
- Leave immediately if drugs are being sold, you smell chemicals, or a threat is made toward you
- Leave quickly without drawing attention to your suspicions if you observe drugs/drug paraphernalia (pipes, needles, etc.), meth lab materials, unlocked guns, child pornography, or other illegal activity. Report your concerns to your supervisor immediately and determine if a police or CPS report is necessary as well.
- When there is a choice, sit in a hard back chair or floor rather than upholstered furniture. When startled by a knock at the door, someone might stick items such as syringes into soft furniture.
- Remain in common areas of the home, such as the living room or kitchen

Mental Illness Concerns
Keep in mind that clients, family members, or neighbors may have unmet mental health needs. While it takes multiple visits to fully assess this, you can determine if there is a danger or concern. If you are concerned, try to make visits when you are not alone with the individual. Provide information on community mental health resources, and discuss the case with your supervisor as needed.
Personal Safety Tips

Here are some final considerations for home visitors, supervisors, and anyone traveling alone in an unfamiliar community:

- Do not carry a purse or lock it in the trunk
- Carry a small wallet or pack for essentials (driver’s license, a little money, work badge, etc.)
- Carry as little as possible; be sure to have one free hand
- Avoid unlit areas; get an buddy or escort to your car after dark
- Fully charge your cell phone with emergency numbers programmed in
- Also have a written list of emergency numbers (including office/supervisor after-hours contacts)
- Know street names and how to describe where you are; have maps or GPS available
- Carry an alarm, pepper spray, or whistle on your key ring to alert people if you are attacked

If you are attacked or stuck in an unsafe situation, use defense techniques:

- Scream
- Yell “HELP!!!”
- Kick shins, instep, groin
- Bite
- Scratch
- Blow a whistle or use an alarm
- Use pepper spray/mace
- Use your bag or keys as a weapon.
- Be willing to give up belongings and supplies without a fight.
  Things can be replaced, you can’t!!

Remember

Attention to safety is always important – at work and in daily life. Knowing that MOST clients are welcoming, protective, and have strong relationships with their home visitors can reduce fears of working in the community. However, it is important to be careful wherever you go.