



Oregon's Home Visitor Safety Guide

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Oregon
Health
Authority

PUBLIC HEALTH DIVISION
Center for Prevention & Health Promotion
Maternal and Child Health Section

Adapted with permission from the Multnomah County Employee Field Safety Guide (2006)

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Introduction

This purpose of these guidelines is to establish a basic set of standards that home visiting programs can use to ensure the safety of their staff while they are away from the office. Local Agency guidelines for safety should be reviewed with new staff members during their initial orientation. Staff members should be encouraged to discuss concerns they have regarding visiting at specific locations or with particular clients with their more experienced colleagues and with managers.

There are many helpful resources that discuss home visitor safety available on the internet. We have included a sampling of links to these resources at the end of this guide.

-MCH CQI Committee – January 2014

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Safety is an ongoing priority in any situation that employees encounter. Employees are expected to understand that safety policies, procedures, and training cannot predict all potentially dangerous situations; therefore they must use their judgment at all times to stay safe.

Field staff members are responsible for their own safety. Ultimately it is the field worker's responsibility to be aware of his or her safety needs and react accordingly. Employees who work in the field are expected to take adequate safety precautions such as: 1) refuse to make calls or become involved in situations that pose a high risk, 2) ask a colleague to accompany them on a visit, 3) abandon a situation because they believe they are in danger, or 4) proceed in a limited fashion due to safety concerns. Employees are expected to notify police or proper authorities when appropriate. Employees are also expected to notify their supervisor when there has been concern for safety in a situation.

Plan Ahead

1. When warranted, consider completing the "Outreach Site Safety Assessment" (Attachment 1) for new clients and for those clients for whom a change in circumstance poses potential risk. This assessment tool is provided to help a home visitor evaluate a situation and to consult with a supervisor when the employee determines a need.
2. DO NOT VISIT an individual at home or in the community if:
 - The assessed risk of aggression is high or extreme.
 - There is evidence of drug sales or manufacture.
 - There are weapons present.
 - Any individual is intoxicated or under the influence of drugs to a degree that the home visitor feels unsafe.
 - Any individual is exhibiting signs of aggression.
 - There is evidence of a violent dispute in or near the home, or violence is known to have recently occurred and the perpetrator is at the address or is likely to arrive during the visit.
 - Violence is directed towards the home visitor.
 - A threat is made against the home visitor.
 - Any individual states that the home visitor is not welcome in the home.
3. If the location of your visit is unfamiliar to you, find a colleague who may be familiar with the location to brief you regarding any known risks or possible hazards.
4. Consult with your supervisor if you have concerns about going into the home or site alone.
5. Contact the individual before the scheduled appointment to confirm the appointment. Ask if there are any animals on the property and if they will be confined during your visit.
6. Schedule appointments during daylight hours, when possible.
7. Have precise driving directions to your visit location.
8. If you use a GPS system or MapQuest, enter your office address as the home location, not your personal home address.
9. Develop familiarity with each neighborhood area so you are aware of exits and would recognize unusual or suspicious activity.
10. Use a County vehicle when conducting on-site visits whenever possible. If you must use a personal vehicle for field work, be aware that your license plate number has potential to be used to gain personal information about you.
11. Leave a detailed itinerary of your day's visits with a designated person at your office site. Let your office personnel know the time of your expected return.
12. Arrange your day's visits with questionable location visits scheduled early in the day, when there is less activity (fewer people loitering). If needed, conduct visits in pairs.
13. Take only the items necessary to do your job. Carry a minimal amount of cash.
14. Conceal personal items in the trunk of your car before leaving the office so you are not observed placing items in your trunk.
15. Avoid driving your own vehicle when you have been called to Court for a case regarding a client. Use a County vehicle and notify Court security of any concerns prior to your Court date.

Dress to Protect Yourself

1. Wear shoes you can run in or, if necessary, kick off quickly.
2. Avoid wearing expensive Jewelry or any accessory that could be dangerous (dangling scarves, necklaces, neckties, etc.).
3. Wear clothes that are appropriate, washable and easy for running, if necessary.
4. Always wear your employee identification.
5. Select bright colored clothes to make yourself more visible at night.
6. Lock your purse in the trunk of the car and wear clothes with pockets to carry minimal necessities. Phone covers often have a place for an extra car key, a business card, and small amount of cash.
7. Carry a noise making device such as a whistle.

Car Safety

1. Keep your car in good repair. Know who to call if your vehicle breaks down.
2. Carry an emergency flat tire repair kit with you and learn how to use it.
3. Ensure the fuel tank is full.
4. Drive with your car doors locked and, if possible, car windows rolled up.
5. Don't leave equipment, cell phones, packages or bags visible inside your car. Place all valuables in the trunk and out of sight of passersby.
6. Always carry your keys in your hand when you are leaving the office to go to your car, from your home to your car, or from an appointment back to your car.
7. If you have two sets of car keys, carry both sets, one set to use and one set to have in reserve, concealed in your notebook or bag.
8. Check an up-to-date weather report before driving to your visit, especially if you are driving a significant distance.
9. Carry an Emergency Car Kit that contains flairs, first aid supplies, water and a thermal blanket.
10. If someone bumps you from behind or is following you, don't stop in a remote area. Drive to a well-lighted public place with other people. Stay in your car and dial 911.



Neighborhood Surveillance (while in the car)

1. Be aware of the surroundings. Drive around the area observing fences, bushes and other hiding places.
2. Look for safe places to go, in case of emergency: gas stations, businesses, fire department, Tri-Met bus, Utilities truck, etc.
3. Observe the activity near the location of the site visit. Avoid groups of people who may be drinking, fighting, yelling or appear hostile. If you cannot avoid the group to reach your destination, leave and reschedule your visit.
4. Be cautious of all animals, even if they appear to be restrained in some manner. Be aware of signs that indicate the presence of an animal such as food or water dish or a worn animal path around the yard.
5. Be aware that high rise buildings present a fire safety concern.
6. Pay attention to signs like "No Trespassing", "Beware of the Dog", "Beware of the Owner", as they may be an indicator of the attitude towards strangers.
7. Signs like "Neighborhood Watch Block" are indicators that others in the community have an increased awareness of unfamiliar activities, potential crime events and looking out for their neighbors.
8. **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS.**

Parking and Leaving the Car

1. Choose a parking space that is in the open and near a light source that offers the safest walking route to your visitation site.
2. Park on the street rather than in a driveway to avoid potentially blocked exits.
3. Park in the direction you want to go when leaving the appointment.
4. Be wary of Dead End streets.
5. Try to park where you can see your car from inside the visitation site, if possible, and try to watch it periodically during your appointment.
6. Avoid rubble and glass that can flatten a tire or an abrupt edge of a road shoulder or ditch that can immobilize your car.
7. Always lock your car.
8. Attract the attention of the homeowner if animals are loose and pose a threat to your safety. Ask the owner to hold or remove the animals.
9. Know where the apartment manager's office is located if you have to park in visitor parking a long distance from your appointment location. The manager can be a good source of information or, if necessary, safety.

Approaching the Dwelling

1. Announce your presence when arriving so you don't surprise anyone.
2. Maintain a self-confident, self-assured posture and attitude. Walk briskly, with purpose, looking around to identify potentially hazardous situations.
3. Keep to the middle of the sidewalk and sidestep dark alleyways, bars and groups of loiterers whenever possible.
4. Be aware of other regular visitors in the community, like the mailperson, who can advise you of hazards, such as dogs, or come to your assistance, if needed.
5. Maintain a professional demeanor if you are verbally confronted. Repeat your response directly and don't attempt to answer verbal challenges.
6. Make a mental note of other exits as soon as you have entered the building. Use caution when using stairways. Notice if people or objects are located on the stairs or landings. Walk quickly and be especially vigilant when walking in dimly lit hallways or deserted stairwells.
7. Approach the elevator you may be using with special caution. Don't get in until you've sent it down to the basement and waited for it to come back up. This technique protects you from inadvertently getting on an elevator that is headed down and possibly facing a stranger in a deserted basement. Use an empty elevator if possible. Always stand next to the door and by the control panel. If you are having a problem, push all the buttons so the elevator stops on all the floors, giving a greater chance of escape.
8. Trust your instincts at all times. If there is something suspicious about a person waiting to get on an elevator with you, step aside and wait. If someone suspicious gets on while you are already in the elevator, get off as soon as possible.
9. Meet your client in the lobby or at the front door. Give them an approximate time of arrival so they will be looking for you.
10. Acknowledge your presence and purpose to a group of people as you approach, if appropriate.
11. Alert the apartment manager that you are on the premises or in the building, if appropriate.
12. Pause at the door before knocking and listen. If you hear loud quarreling, sounds of fighting, or some other disturbance, leave immediately.
13. Knock at the door, identify yourself, and use the client's name. Stand to the side of the door until you receive a response. Don't stand in front of a window.
14. Decide if you will enter the site or invite the client outside depending upon what you can see happening inside, once the door is answered.
15. **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS.** Do not enter a site when you suspect that an unsafe situation exists.



Canine Considerations

1. Any dog may bite.
2. Before visiting the site, ask if there are any animals you need to be aware of. Upon arrival, look for signs of a dog before entering the yard or house.
3. Do not surprise a dog – call out or tap on a gate if present.
4. If a dog is unleashed within a fenced yard, do not attempt to enter the yard. Return to your car and call the client to notify them that you are at the site; ask them to confine the dog in a safe place.
5. If taken by surprise by a potentially hostile dog, use the following techniques:
 - Take off sunglasses, if you are wearing them.
 - Do not run or turn your back to the animal.
 - Stand still, let the dog approach.
 - Speak softly, but use firm commands.
 - Do not stare at the dog's eyes.
 - Give the dog something, other than your hand, to bite.
 - Shield your neck and face, if the dog lunges at you.

Inside the Visitation Site

1. Do not let your guard down, if you decide it is safe to enter. Be alert to signs of violence or sexual advances, however subtle, from either a client or a member of the family.
2. Be courteous. Speak your name clearly, the agency you represent, and why you are there.
3. Ask to be seated. Choose a hard chair if possible. Give the client your business card and be prepared to show them your official identification.
4. If possible, sit so your back is to a solid wall, not to an unknown space.
5. Sit as close to the door as possible to give you quick egress, if necessary. Beware of dead bolt locks, padlocks, and self-locking doors.
6. Be aware of other people in the visitation site and traffic in and out of the site.
7. Use the same principles inside the site as you used outside to get there.
8. Do not assume an animal is harmless, despite what the owner says. Ask the owner to restrain or remove the animal.
9. Evaluate the potential for danger if weapons, such as guns or knives, are visible. You may feel that leaving and rescheduling is your best option.
10. Ask permission before going to another part of the site.
11. Do not go into a dark room (or basement or attic) first. Have your client go first and turn on the light. Follow them, never lead, even if you have previously been to their site.
12. Take your belongings with you, if you return to your vehicle during the visit.
13. Do not carry your personal address with you.
14. Knock again or say hello to announce yourself when you return from your car with extra equipment or supplies.
15. If you see someone tampering with your vehicle, DO NOT try to stop the suspect. Call 911 as quickly as you safely can.
16. If a raid should occur at the site of your visit while you are there, follow law enforcement instructions and follow up with your client at a later time.

Discussing Sensitive Topics with Clients

Be very cautious about broaching sensitive topics during visits unless you know who else might be listening. Sometimes, the client's boyfriend, husband or another family member may be listening from another room, and may confront you or the client if he/she is unhappy with a particular topic being discussed. Topics which may be sensitive include domestic violence, substance abuse by any adults who are caring for children in the home, legal issues, birth control or family planning issues. It is always wise to check with the client either prior to the visit or by writing a note during the visit that the client can read and nod either yes or no, indicating whether it is safe to discuss a particular topic. You may be able to schedule a visit at the health department or another location if the client would like to discuss sensitive issues with you.

Methamphetamine Lab

One of the most hazardous situations you could encounter while at a visitation site would be a methamphetamine lab.

1. Some residences are the locations of drug activity or meth labs. Be alert to sites whose view to the interior is obstructed in some manner by blinds, or the windows are boarded over, etc.
2. The drug manufacturing process can be odorless or smell like stale cat urine. If this odor or other signs indicate the presence of a meth lab or, if you do not feel comfortable with your situation, leave immediately.
3. Remember that glassware items are typical in a meth lab operation and many of these items can be found in an average kitchen. Be alert to typical glassware items that are in untypical locations.
4. Meth labs can be set up in any location: buses, trailers, homes, motel rooms.
5. Leave immediately if lab glassware and chemical containers are present. Don't touch anything at the location. Call 911 at the first safe opportunity to report a possible meth lab operation.

Leaving the Visitation Site

1. Thank the client for allowing you to come to the visit site.
2. Collect all your belongings.
3. As you leave, observe activities outside the visit site.
4. If there are crowds of people, be aware and continue moving toward your car.
5. Have your car keys in hand. As you unlock the door, look in the back seat and on the floor for unwanted passengers.
6. Get into your car quickly and lock all doors.
7. Do not be rude, or appear intimidated, if someone is leaning up against your car. Get in quickly, lock all doors and leave. If this is not possible, return to the visit site and call 911.
8. Even though your personal safety is important, don't forget to check for small children or animals that may be present near or under your car. Be sure to check both sides and to the rear of your car before moving from your parking place.

General Procedures for Personal Safety and Security

1. Treat everyone with dignity and respect
2. Get to know the people in your care.
3. Learn to set limits effectively.
4. Avoid being drawn into power struggles.
5. Be aware of your speaking tone, volume and cadence. It's not what you say but how you say it.

If you are in a threatening situation:

1. Don't show fear. Control your breathing.
2. Speak slowly and lower the pitch of your voice.
3. Repeat the purpose of your visit and thank them for letting you visit.
4. Stand up and leave; be aware of body posture or sudden movements. State that your office is expecting your call.
5. Maintain eye contact, but don't try to stare anyone down.
6. Don't challenge; do be assertive.
7. Rehearse ahead of time what you would say and what you might do if an unsafe situation arises.

911 Police Emergency: Be Prepared to report the following information:

1. Type of incident reported (assault, theft, etc.).
2. Time of occurrence (now, in the past 30 minutes, longer).
3. Location (exactly where you are or where the incident occurred): address, side of street, landmarks, route to get to location.

What to observe if possible:

1. Individual: gender, race, age, height, weight, hair color and length, clothing (type and color), any distinguishing characteristics (limp, acne, etc.), weapon involved and type.
2. Vehicle: color, type, size, model, year, license plate number, condition, any distinguishing characteristics.

Follow dispatcher's instructions regarding staying on the phone. Identify yourself to the police officer responding to the scene and follow their instructions.

In the event of an assault

If you are attacked or threatened, you have the right to defend yourself. How you choose to defend yourself will depend on the circumstances of the assault and your abilities. Consider learning more about self-defense techniques.

Conclusion

You can significantly reduce the chance of becoming a victim by being aware of your surroundings at all times. Know your agency policy on safety while conducting home visits. Practice the techniques recommended in this guide.

Be familiar with the location of the visit prior to the visit. Discuss any concerns you have with your colleagues or supervisor; they can provide information and support.

Most importantly: TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS.

Resources

Dog bite prevention from the Humane Society of the United States website: Public Health Madison and Dane county
<http://www.publichealthmdc.com/environmental/animal/DogBitePrevention.cfm>

Home Visitor Safety: MIECHV Program Training Module

Adapted from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare Family and Community Services:

Social Worker Academy - Worker Safety

<http://www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov/Portals/0/Children/HomeVisiting/Home%20Visitor%20Safety%20Training.pdf>

Milwaukee County (Wisconsin) Home Visitor Safety and Self-Care

<http://milwaukee.uwex.edu/family-living/home-visitor-safety/>

Oklahoma Home Visitor Safety Training

This is a safety resource guide that can be utilized as a training course with several key areas available in video format; developed by the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH). The resources here have been graciously provided by OSDH.

<http://friendsnrc.org/cbcap-priority-areas/home-visitation/oklahoma-home-visitor-training>

Personal Safety

A guide for field workers to minimize risks to personal safety while conducting visits in the community. Chelan-Douglas health department March 2011 accessed online 4/15/2013 at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/Pubs/343-Non-PersonalSafety.pdf>

Attachment 1: Outreach Site Safety Assessment

Client name: _____

DOB: _____

Agency ID # _____

- Initial assessment date: _____
- Revised assessment date: _____

Risk Factors:

- Animals in the home
- Drug or gang activity in the home or neighborhood
- History of intimate partner violence
- History of suicide attempt (individual or family member) _____
- History of violence against others, animals, and/or property
- Medication non-compliance
- Past threats to an employee
- Persistent self-destructive or aggressive behavior
- Public Health concerns (list): _____
- Uncomfortable, assaultive behavior toward self or others
- Unsecured weapons in the home

A home visitor should not go into the home, or should leave the home, if:

- The assessed risk of aggression is high or extreme.
- There is evidence of drug sales or manufacture.
- There are weapons present.
- Any individual is intoxicated or under the influence of drugs to a degree that the home visitor feels unsafe.
- Any individual is exhibiting signs of aggression.
- There is evidence of a violent dispute in or near the home, or violence is known to have recently occurred and the perpetrator is at the address, or is likely to arrive, during the visit.
- Violence is directed towards the home visitor.
- A threat is made against the home visitor.
- Any individual states that the home visitor is not welcome in the home.

If any of these conditions occur, the home visitor's supervisor should be notified immediately!

Completed by: _____ Date: _____

Additional instructions (provided by supervisor)
