

Personal Safety Tips

Good engagement and the development of relationships with families are the MOST significant factors in your success and safety.

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Preparing for the Home Visit

- Conduct background checks through Colorado Courts on every adult in the home.
- Read through Trails and familiarize yourself with the family's history.
- When reviewing the criminal and Trails history, assess for a history of violence in the home and the presence of animals and plan accordingly.
- Discuss concerns with your supervisor and plan for them.
- Review your personal safety plan with your supervisor.
- Consider your physical appearance. Avoid wearing flashy jewelry that may make you a target. Be mindful of covering up tattoos that might convey personal beliefs to people.
- If you have long hair, consider pulling it up so that it is harder to grab.
- Consider wearing shoes and clothing that are comfortable, that protect your feet, and that you can move easily and quickly in.
- Wear your badge on a belt loop clip, *not* on a neck lanyard.
- Make sure either your supervisor or a coworker knows when you'll be going out to visit a family and where you'll be.
- Arrange to check in with someone after you have safely left the home.
- Always carry a cell phone and make sure your cell phone is charged.
- Make sure there is gas in your vehicle and the vehicle is in the best working condition possible. Or use an agency car, if available. Learn agency procedures for car safety.
- Know where you are going ahead of time and plan your route. Google Earth can be a great resource to look at in advance to help you identify the family's home, how you plan to approach the home, and where to park.
- Check the weather forecast. If possible, reschedule the home visit for a time when the weather will be better or you are less likely to get stuck at the family's home.
- Take law enforcement or a coworker with you when necessary.

- Find out ahead of time if there are dogs in the home and, if so, how many. More than two is considered a pack, and pack mentality can kick in if the dogs feel threatened. Ask that dogs be leashed or put in another room before you arrive.

Arriving at the Home

- Notice your surroundings. Pay attention to the neighborhood and any barriers or obstacles to getting into or out of the home.
- Try to be strategic about where and how you park your vehicle. Park where your car will not get blocked in.
- Avoid taking personal belongings into a home unless necessary (e.g., purse, laptop or tablet, briefcase). Leave them locked in the trunk of your car.
- If the entrance is through a fenced-in yard, shake the gate before opening it to see if a dog approaches.
- Observe and listen for signs of an animal. As you approach a home, glance at all the places a dog could hide, such as under parked cars, behind shrubs, or under porches or trailer homes.
- Stand your ground. If a dog comes toward you, stop and face it. If you have a bag or something similar, use it as a shield while backing away slowly. Step carefully to avoid a fall. Turning and running away is likely to excite the dog. Most dogs will try to attack from the rear, so if it circles you, move with it and continue to face it.
- Don't trust dogs. Stay away from chained dogs or dogs on a leash. Even supposedly friendly dogs have been known to bite when in the wrong mood or when they feel threatened.
- Never assume a dog won't bite. Keep your eye on the dog and if necessary ask the family if they would be willing to leash, kennel, or place the dog outside during your visit.
- Avoid showing fear to a dog. Speak to dogs in a friendly manner but do not attempt to pet them.
- Notice trees or bushes that are blocking the entrance to the home.
- If you need to walk past parked cars, try to glance inside the vehicles.
- Assess how much snow is on the ground and whether there is ice underneath.
- When you knock on a door or ring the bell, listen for barking. Keep your knee or foot against a storm door or screen door until you can determine safety. Do not stand in front of the door when you are waiting for someone to answer, but rather stand off to the side or on the outer side of the door.
- Let the caregiver lead you into the home.
- Think about and plan your escape route as you approach and enter the home in case you need to get out quickly.

During Home Visits

- Notice your surroundings throughout the visit. Be aware of sounds, smells, or things you see that cause concern.
- Introduce the reason you are there.
- Be aware of exits and try to make sure you have a clear path to an exit. Don't get cornered in a room.
- Never sit with your back to a door.
- Make sure there are no objects or persons between you and the exit.
- Be aware of who is in a home, their whereabouts, and what they are doing at all times.
- Be aware of animals in the home and evaluate where they are and whether they are awake, and ask the family how they respond to non-family members.
- Watch for lice or other signs of health hazards. Wash your hands or use sanitizing hand cream upon leaving the family's home.
- Explore with the caregivers who in the home should be included in your meeting with the family. If you feel the need, in the interests of your personal safety, to clear the room or the home, do so by discussing your respect for the caregiver and emphasizing that you want to maintain their confidentiality by asking them to have others leave. If you cannot clear the room or home, ask when would be a better time to come back when the caregiver will be alone. Or ask the caregiver to meet with you at your office.
- Notice interactions among people in the home.
- Notice the behavior of the caregiver and others inside the home and if behavior seems to be changing.
- Try to have an obstacle between you and the caregiver that the caregiver will need to overcome in the case of an assault. For example, sit with a table between you. Or make sure you are sitting closest to the door.
- Notice any weapons in the home. Assume that every home has a weapon and every caregiver could access a weapon.
- Be aware of objects in the home that could be used as weapons.
- If there are weapons in the home, notice if the caregiver seems to be glancing at them.
- Explore more than just the concerns that brought you here and be mindful of your language—speak in a strengths-based, appreciative manner that acknowledges the family's or caregiver's feelings. Avoid language that conveys judgments or bias.
- Team with another worker or supervisor when possible.
- Meet in a neutral and safe community location if possible.
- Take the police with you when necessary.
- Use common sense: if you feel at risk, *leave*—and return later with support and a better plan.

In the Office

- If the caregiver has a history of violence or if you are concerned that the caregiver's behavior might escalate, let security know and tell them where you will be meeting with the caregiver.
- If possible, meet in a place where others can see what is going on.
- If you have to meet in your office or at your desk, make sure items that can be thrown at you are taken off your desk and put away.
- If you need to meet in your office or at your desk, make sure you are not cornered in the room.
- If you have to meet in your office or at your desk, make sure all confidential information is put away and locked up.
- If you have to meet in your office or at your desk, be aware of the personal items about you that are visible and that might provide the caregiver with personal information about you. This might include degrees that contain your full name, pictures of family, and any indications of where you live, such as pictures of your home.
- If possible, meet at a time when others will be present. Avoid times like lunchtime or the end of the day, when you might be alone.
- Let someone else in the agency know where you will be for your meeting and ask them to walk by the room at some point during the meeting.
- Be aware of exits.
- Never sit with your back to a door.
- Make sure there are no objects or persons between you and the exit
- Wear shoes you can easily move and run in.
- Avoid wearing neckties or necklaces and earrings that dangle.
- Wear your badge on a belt loop clip, *not* on a neck lanyard.
- Be mindful of your language: speak in a strengths-based, appreciative manner that acknowledges the family's or caregiver's feelings. Avoid language that conveys judgments or bias.

Social Networking

- Set your security settings so that your information is *not* available to everyone.
- Allow only those designated as friends to have access to your personal and contact information.
- Do not accept a friend request from someone whom you do not know personally and by name.
- Avoid posting personal details about your life, family, and whereabouts.
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Adapted from: Matz, K. (August 2011). *Think safe: Protecting you while serving them*. Englewood, CO: American Humane Association.