

Chapter 3

PLANNING FOR CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONAL SAFETY

3-1. Purpose. Each case has the potential for problematic interactions with parents because many individuals feel threatened simply by the child welfare professional showing up at their home. Even more challenging are the unavoidable conflicts that arise when the child welfare professional has to initiate an involuntary safety intervention as part of a protective action. Parents can verbally threaten or even attempt to assault the child welfare professional under these circumstances. The first step in ensuring safety is to evaluate the situation before the initial contact.

3-2. Preparation. In order to effectively evaluate personal safety prior to initial contact and subsequent home visits, the child welfare professional must consider the following information:

a. Be prepared for potentially volatile family dynamics:

(1) Is there a history of assaultive behavior by anyone in the family (i.e., aggravated assault, aggravated battery, battery on a law enforcement officer or other person of authority, or use of a weapon in the commission of a crime, etc.)?

(2) Is there a history of domestic violence?

(3) Does the report indicate the possibility of a family member with an unmanaged mental illness who is exhibiting violent or unpredictable behavior?

(4) Are there firearms or other weapons noted in the report?

(5) Is someone in the home abusing alcohol or drugs, likely to currently be under the influence of any substance, or selling and/or manufacturing drugs?

(6) Has the family reacted aggressively during prior investigations?

(7) Does the report describe any household members as potentially violent or hostile?

(8) Are the injuries to the child reportedly severe or life-threatening?

(9) Is it likely the child will be removed from the family situation on this visit?

(10) Does the family have potentially dangerous pets?

b. Consider site logistics, including:

(1) Is the family's geographic location extremely isolated or dangerous? Drive by and observe the house and neighborhood prior to initiating the visit.

(2) Is the home visit after normal working hours?

(3) Does the housing situation or neighborhood increase concerns for an investigator's personal safety?

(4) Are individuals in the household known gang members?

(5) Are there any animals in the home that may pose a threat to the child welfare professional?

(6) Learn the safest route to and from the family's home.

(7) Be sure the car is in good working order, and park it in a way that allows a quick exit, such as backing the vehicle in for a quick departure.

(8) Carry a cell phone with a charged battery.

(9) Plan to make initial contacts with another staff person or law enforcement when circumstances warrant.

c. Always inform the supervisor or other personnel of the child welfare professional's interview/visitation schedule and approximate return time when there is contact with the family.

3-3. On-site Precautions. The child welfare professional should always take the following precautions:

a. Place all personal items in the car trunk prior to leaving for the home visit.

b. Have access by telephone to a supervisor or designated staff person for consultation.

c. Memorize the address and home's location.

d. Closely observe each person in and around the area and watch for signs that may indicate the potential for personal violence.

e. Follow one's instincts. Any time the child welfare professional feels frightened or unsafe, he or she should assess the immediate situation and take whatever action is necessary to obtain protection.

f. When inside the home, the child welfare professional should:

(1) Ask who else is currently home or expected to return soon.

(2) Identify which rooms have closed doors (and possibly contain individuals).

(3) Identify how many exit points are in the home.

(4) Be aware of the best location within the home for the interview to be conducted.

(5) Avoid sitting with your back to a door or window.

(6) Avoid having to walk past someone to leave the home.

3-4. Supervisor.

a. The supervisor should ensure that all child welfare professionals in their unit know local safety planning protocols and expectations, including when law enforcement must be contacted to accompany a child welfare professional.

b. The supervisor will identify under what circumstances, if any, a supervisor consultation will be required to ensure personal safety planning is adequate.