

SPECIALIZED FOSTER CARE GUIDELINES MANUAL

SECTION 6: SPECIALIZED FOSTER CARE SAFETY TIPS

PURPOSE

This manual section provides safety tips for consideration by DMH Co-Located Specialized Foster Care (SFC) staff to assist them in protecting themselves from dangerous situations while making home calls and other face-to-face visits in the field.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME

1. Use sound judgment, caution and common sense. Pay attention to your intuitive feelings.
2. Photocopy or keep a list of all credit cards that you carry in your purse/wallet and keep the list in a safe place for future reference.
3. Consider carrying only a limited number of valuables in the purse/wallet that you carry into the field. Don't carry more than you can afford to lose.
4. Dress practically and sensibly, wearing low-heeled shoes rather than high heels, to allow you to run at full speed if you are in imminent danger.
5. Carry a fully charged cell phone with you at all times, even if it is your personal one. Pre-dial 911 into the phone so that pressing "send" is all that is needed if an emergency occurs.
6. Consider carrying a battery-operated emergency cell phone charger, in addition to keeping a charger that works off your car "cigarette lighter" socket.
7. Maintain a low profile and blend in with the surroundings rather than look overdressed or flashy.
8. Wear limited or no jewelry. Avoid wearing expensive watches, gold chains and rings. Excessive, expensive-looking and flashy jewelry call attention to yourself and make you a target for robbers. Consider carrying a shoulder bag rather than a purse.
9. Learn to use everyday objects, such as ballpoint pens, key rings, or combs, to protect yourself if it becomes necessary.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME (CONT.)

10. Whenever you use valet parking, consider handing over only your ignition key. An attendant or accomplice could look up your address in your car and enter your home while you are gone if you give him your house key along with your car key.
11. If you believe that hostile clients may want to find out your home address from your license place, go to the DMV with your employee identification and ask DMV to computer block your identifying information from parties who may inquire.
12. Consider using a Post Office number on your Driver's License and Vehicle Registration Card. The law does not require that you use a full address on these documents.
13. Maintain an ample supply of gasoline. Keep a spare key.
14. Keep your car in good running order, with regular tune-ups and oil changes.
15. You may want to belong to an emergency roadside service group.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE OFFICE

1. Try to anticipate potential problems, have a plan of action in mind in the event that you encounter a situation that appears dangerous, and be alert to your circumstances at all times.
2. If you have appointments in high crime areas, consider scheduling them during the morning hours, before the activity on the streets has begun.
3. Give your supervisor a copy of your field itinerary and check in periodically throughout the day.
4. If the referral indicates potential violence, such as threatened use of weapons or gang activity, discuss the situation with your supervisor and the CSW. You may wish to consider making a joint home visit with the CSW and for the CSW to request law enforcement assistance.
5. Consider/discuss use of team response with your supervisor.
6. If necessary, plot out your course using Mapquest or a street map.
7. Obtain as much information as possible about potential danger before leaving the office.
8. You may wish to ask the client to meet you at the curb when you arrive.

WHILE WALKING TO/FROM YOUR CAR (Cont.)

1. You may want to lock your purse/wallet in the trunk of your car before leaving the parking structure.
2. Carry your keys in your hand so that you can unlock the car door without delay. (Keys also make a good weapon if you have to defend yourself.)
3. Keep a spare car door key separate from your other keys.
4. Choose a safe path to your car.
5. Check the interior of your car before you get in.
6. Walk with purpose and confidence, aware and erect. Be alert to people around you. Be cautious of strangers who approach and speak to you.
7. Avoid alleyways and groups of individuals that may be intoxicated or loitering.
8. Try to make eye contact with people who pass you on the street.
9. Try not to respond to conversation from strangers. If you must respond (for example, if someone asks you for directions) keep your response short and maintain a safe distance. Keep walking, do not stop!
10. Walk with your hands free; don't carry unnecessary parcels or bags.
11. Try to walk in the middle of the sidewalk, facing oncoming traffic. Avoid doorways, bushes and alleyways, where someone could easily be hiding.
12. If walking at night, stay in well-lighted areas whenever possible.

WHILE IN YOUR CAR

1. If you carry your purse/wallet inside your car, make certain it is not visible to someone who looks into the car, such as by placing it under the seat or under your legs. When cars are stopped at traffic signals, gangs have smashed their windows and grabbed purses that are visible while the drivers were still dazed from the explosion of the glass.
2. Before leaving your car, you may wish to consider locking your purse/wallet in the trunk of other safe place.
3. Keep a road atlas or Thomas Guide in your car at all times.
4. Keep a working flashlight in your car at all times.

WHILE IN YOUR CAR (CONT.)

5. Always lock your car doors and windows while driving or when leaving the car. Robbers sometimes reach in open car windows at traffic signals to grab watches or other jewelry.
6. Never roll down your window to talk to a stranger. Open it just enough (2 to 3 inches) to talk.
7. If you think you are being followed, drive to the nearest police or fire station or any busy public place. Robbers don't want witnesses.
8. Avoid making contact with objects or obstacles that can cause your vehicle to be rendered inoperable.

WHILE ENTERING THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF YOUR CLIENT

1. Try to have a plan of action once you view the surroundings.
2. Park near the client's residence, but not directly in front of the client's home, in order to limit the distance you have to walk in the community. At night, park in a visible area that is well lit, if possible.
3. Look around before getting out of your car. Don't get out if the situation looks too dangerous. Call 911 and report the situation to law enforcement, and come back later when the situation appears less dangerous.
4. If you are using an elevator, observe the inside of the elevator before entering. Wait for the next elevator if someone inside looks suspicious.
5. While in an elevator, stand next to the control panel. If accosted, you can press the alarm button. Exit the elevator if a suspicious person enters.
6. If you are using a stairwell, look up to see if people are loitering. Exit the stairs if you are suspicious of any conditions.
7. Before entering a fenced yard, make noise so that any animals in the yard will come into sight. You may wish to carry something that can be thrown at an attacking dog, such as a rolled newspaper or rawhide chew.
8. Never show fear to a dog. A dog feels more powerful if it knows you are afraid.
9. A barking dog is not necessarily dangerous or vicious. A dog that grows while baring its teeth, however, usually is. Do not make eye contact with an apparently dangerous or vicious dog. Making eye contact only engages the dog.

WHILE APPROACHING/ENTERING HOME OF CLIENT

1. Look and listen as you approach the client's residence. When you knock, avoid excessive knocking, as it can sometimes upset people. Listen for any loud conversation or other sounds that might be coming from within the residence.
2. Stand to the side of the door while knocking so that you will not be directly in front of any upset or agitated person answering the door.
3. If invited in, ask someone inside to open the door for you. If he/she cannot open the door, push the door open and scan the room/home for any potential dangers, such as weapons. Enter only if you feel it is safe to do so.
4. As you enter, immediately assess the situation by scanning the entire room. Try to make eye contact with whoever is in the room.
5. If the client denies access, or is threatening and angrily demands that you leave, you should leave immediately.
6. If someone other than the client denies access, or is threatening and angrily demands that you leave, and you feel the client is endangered, you should report the situation to your supervisor and to the CSW, and consider arranging a joint home visit with the CSW.
7. Sit near an exit door; you do not want to be blocked from exiting. Keep a clear path between yourself and an exit from the residence.
8. If you don't feel comfortable using the living room for the interview, you may wish to suggest another location, such as the front porch.
9. If you anticipate that someone may get angry during the visit, the kitchen would not be a safe place for an interview, due to the presence of sharp objects and knives.
10. If the client or someone else looks threatening, locks or bolts the door behind you, and/or places him/herself between you and the door, you should consider leaving immediately. You can make an excuse that you forgot something in your car in order to flee the property.

ATTITUDE TOWARD CLIENT

1. Be aware of your own personal reactions.
2. Always display courtesy and politeness. If you are in the client's home, treat the client as the host, and you will more likely be treated as a guest.

ATTITUDE TOWARD CLIENT

3. Remain impartial. You must believe and communicate, verbally and non-verbally, that you are a neutral third party who is present to be helpful.
4. In your approach, it is best to be open-minded and problem-solving rather than accusatory and judgmental.
5. You must try to accept the individual as a person, even if you cannot accept his/her behavior.
6. If you are aware that you are unable to be a neutral third party (for example, if you are angry or feel hostility towards the alleged abuser), it would be fairer to the alleged abuser, and safer for yourself, to have him/her interviewed by another staff person.

INTERVIEWING

1. Explain who you are and the purpose of your visit.
2. Be alert and aware of what is going on, such as verbal and non-verbal communication, level of tension, etc. Keep in touch with your intuition and “gut level feeling.”
3. Remember that most communication is non-verbal rather than verbal.
4. Try to establish a friendly working relationship with the client, and avoid springing surprises.
5. Keep a flow of conversation going, making sure each person has sufficient opportunity to speak.
6. Maintain an adult-to-adult level with those to whom you are speaking. Sit down with them. Do not stand over them in an authoritarian manner.
7. Advise the client of what you expect of him/her, and what the consequences of inappropriate behavior will be.
8. Never make any promises you cannot keep.
9. Upon conclusion of the home visit, you may wish to ask the client to walk you to your car.

IF CLIENT BECOMES AGITATED

1. Lower your voice and remain calm. Speak slowly and reassuringly.
2. Remain still, do not move towards or away from an angry person.
3. Remember that the client is not in control, so you need to be.
4. If two clinicians/social workers are present, and two people are hostile towards one another, separate them, and have one clinician/social worker interview one party while the second one interviews the other.
5. If it becomes necessary to separate parties, avoid using the kitchen or bedroom for this purpose, since weapons may be available in those locations.
6. Do not let the separation time go on too long, as one or other of the parties may become overly suspicious. Make sure to bring everyone back together again after they have cooled down
7. Acknowledge a person's anger, such as by saying, "I can see that you are angry about this matter." If you pretend anger does not exist, the angry person may feel obligated to escalate his/her anger so that you finally get the message.
8. If the client asks you to leave, or if you feel unsafe by remaining any longer, leave immediately! The more you confront a hostile client, the more resistant he/she will become.

HANDLING EMERGENCIES

1. If your car breaks down on the freeway, stay locked inside with the windows up. Use your cell phone to call your emergency roadside service group, if you belong to one. Otherwise, call 911 or a tow truck service.
2. If someone stops to help you, keep your doors locked, roll down the windows just enough (2-3 inches) to talk to him and ask him to call 911 or a tow truck, if your cell phone is not available. Do not accept help from strangers!
3. Consider not raising your hood. A car with the hood up alerts everyone that the car is disabled and that the occupants are unable to leave the area.
4. Do not stop to help others! If you see someone stranded along the road, call 911 and report the situation.
5. If you carry a purse, and someone grabs it, it is generally better to let it go rather than get hurt by clinging to it.

HANDLING EMERGENCIES (CONT.)

6. If you are robbed, remain composed and try not to show fear. Never beg for mercy! Showing fear or begging for mercy makes the robber feel more powerful and in control.

7. Most authorities recommend that you cooperate if being robbed. Others advise you to try to disable the robber and run away. You will have to assess the situation and decide what course of action is best for you.