

Home Visitor Personal Safety

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Scott Strobel
STI/HIV Care Quality Coordinator
Bureau of Disease Control & Prevention
Kansas Department of Health & Environment



Our Mission: To protect and improve the health and environment of all Kansans.

Objectives

1. Participants will be able to identify potential safety risks while conducting public health activities in patient/client homes and other non-clinical settings.
2. When faced with unsafe circumstances, participants will be able to describe appropriate practices and responses to maintain their personal safety.

Preparing for Field Work

- Planning Your Visits
- Apparel, Equipment, and Supplies
- Communication and Accountability

Preparing For Field Work

Planning Your Visits

- Know the purpose of your visit and determine whether it is safe to engage in a client visit alone.
- Plan your field work before leaving the office.
 - Map your route to and from (multiple visits)
 - Familiarize yourself with your client. Review charts, intake forms, and other staff members for possible safety concerns (violence, substance abuse, etc.)
 - Mentally rehearse the visit and what needs to be accomplished.

Preparing For Field Work

Planning Your Visits (cont.)

- When scheduling your visits:
 - Try to conduct field work during daylight hours; in the morning if possible.
 - When making visits outside of normal business hours (early morning or evening), be sure that someone else knows about it (supervisor, co-worker, etc.). Also, let them know when you have completed the visit.

Preparing For Field Work

Apparel, Equipment, and Supplies

- Ensure that your vehicle is in good running condition; has enough gas, spare tire, etc.
- Ensure that you have all of the supplies you may need to complete your visit (forms, medical supplies, PPE, etc.), and that all of your necessary electronic devices are functioning properly and have fully-charged batteries.
- Also be prepared for situations unrelated to your clients and visits; extreme temperatures, flat tires or other car problems, maps for getting lost, etc.

Preparing For Field Work

Apparel, Equipment, and Supplies (cont.)

- Clothing can do several things that can either work for us or against us when conducting public health work in public. Consider the following functions of clothing:
 - **Protection** – keeps us warm/cool, and safe from potential hazards
 - **Identification** – makes a statement about our personality, background, and any affiliations that we may have
 - **Status** – demonstrates what is “proper” and how successful or important we view ourselves to be

Preparing For Field Work

Apparel, Equipment, and Supplies (cont.)

- Clothing DOs:
 - Wear COMFORTABLE shoes – Make sure you can run in whatever shoes you wear, and ensure that they can protect your feet from sharp objects and other hazards.
 - Be aware of the image that religious or political symbols and clothing will project, and how that image is likely to be interpreted by the communities you are working in.
 - Limit physical vulnerabilities resulting from your apparel; Wear long hair up, avoid scarves, and use clip-on ties to prevent these things from being used against you in an altercation.
 - Take your Agency Identification, but be careful to cover or conceal it if confidentiality may be an issue.

Preparing For Field Work

Apparel, Equipment, and Supplies (cont.)

- Clothing DON'Ts:
 - Wear excessive jewelry or displays of wealth – Take only what is essential to visit that client.
 - Limit valuables or money on your person.
 - Secure all credit cards, wallets, purses and personal belongings in the trunk BEFORE leaving the office.
 - Dress differently or make attempts to blend in – you will eventually be recognized as someone that does not belong, and your motivations will be questioned (assumed to be an undercover cop).

Preparing For Field Work

Communication and Accountability

- Cell phones: It is recommended that all field staff carry cell phones and program appropriate numbers to be quickly accessed in any given situation.
- Keep your coworkers and supervisors informed:
 - They will likely be visiting the same areas, if not the same residences and/or clients
 - It is important that your whereabouts are known and that field staff are reachable in case of emergencies
 - Check in periodically with other program staff and let them know when you are visiting dangerous areas

Conducting Your Field Work

- Safety Risk Assessments
- Planning to Leave
- Personal Attitude & Demeanor
- Situational Awareness
- Concluding Your Visit

Conducting Your Field Work

Safety Risk Assessment

- Always observe the residence, building, and any rooms or internal spaces before you enter them.
- Look before you sit down. Try to sit on hard chairs as opposed to cushioned chairs.
- Use your intuition and common sense when approaching clients' neighborhoods and homes.
- Identify and mentally “bookmark” safe places in your area(s) that you can go to if you feel threatened.
- If you believe that your safety is threatened, remove yourself from the situation immediately.

Conducting Your Field Work

Planning to Leave

- When arriving at your destination, back your vehicle into parking spaces. Face your car in the direction you want to leave, and park in a well-lit area.
- When entering any location, be aware of the exits and try to keep yourself between the client and the door.
- Sit near an exit or facing the hallways so you can view halls and bedrooms.
- Always lock your vehicle and keep the keys within easy reach at all times.

Conducting Your Field Work

Personal Attitude and Demeanor

- Use non-threatening body language and remain calm and polite.
- Walk with a purpose and look confident.
- Promote the feeling that you are in the area to help someone and that you expect to leave as soon as you are finished.

Conducting Your Field Work

Personal Attitude and Demeanor (cont.)

- When you arrive, ensure that your client knows who you are and why you are there – be ready to present your badge if needed.
- Be respectful, and avoid negative reactions to untidiness, or unpleasant surroundings and smells.
- Avoid accepting food or drinks, but be respectful of the client's feelings and/or culture.

Conducting Your Field Work

Situational Awareness

- Continuously observe your environment for any changes; particularly those that may indicate dangers.
- When you knock on doors, check windows and listen for unusual sounds or activities.
- Do not attempt to initiate a home visit if the client or others in the home are inappropriately dressed or if the client appears to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- Do not remain at any location where illegal activity is occurring.

Conducting Your Field Work

Concluding Your Visit

- Exit the area with the same vigilance as when you came in.
- Approach your car with keys in hand. If your car has an alarm be prepared to use it if necessary.
- If people are hanging around your car, walk away and call someone. Go to another location.
- Do not linger in the area or in your car after a visit.
- Do not sit in your car to make notes or plan additional visits. If possible, move to another location or complete paperwork back at the office.

Unsafe Situations

- Environmental Hazards
- Unusual Circumstances
- Animals
- Weapons
- Mental Health & Substance Abuse

Unsafe Situations

Environmental Hazards

- **Weather:**

- Know the weather forecasts and prepare accordingly for conditions that may affect your ability to navigate or see clearly (fog, heavy rain/snow, seasonal burning)
- Check on flooding and bridge/road closures after heavy rainfall

- **Driving/Traffic:**

- Make sure your vehicle is prepared to navigate the conditions, and that you know how to drive safely in those conditions
- Drive Defensively

Unsafe Situations

Environmental Hazards (cont.)

- **Exposure Risks & Contaminants:**

- Be aware of spills, containers, or other objects that may include hazardous substances
- Drug use may result in the presence of chemicals used to manufacture them, or contaminated sharps/needles
- Poor ventilation, low light, and other factors like moisture can promote the growth of hazardous molds and transmission of respiratory infections like tuberculosis

Unsafe Situations

Environmental Hazards (cont.)

- **Other Risky Environments:**

- Avoid dark places, blind corners, or other confined spaces that impair your ability to observe what is happening in your vicinity
- Know where the possible trouble spots or other high-risk areas are located in your assigned area (gang turf/hangouts, drug houses, etc.)

Unsafe Situations

Unusual Circumstances

- Pay attention to the “normal” circumstances of the areas you work in, so that you can identify possible indications of trouble
 - **People** – avoid unusual crowds and empty places that are normally busy
 - **Noise** – avoid people having loud arguments or altercations; be cautious when things are “too quiet”
 - **Entry/Exit Routes** – pay attention to construction, closures or other changes that affect your ability to leave (stairs, hallways, elevators)

Unsafe Situations

Animals

- Before entering a fenced yard, look for signs of a dog (chew toys, droppings) and rattle the gate before opening it.
- When inside a home, ask for dogs or other animals to be put in another room.
- If threatened by a dog or other animal;
 - Do not run or make any sudden movements
 - Stand still; don't stare, but keep the animal in sight.
 - Slowly back away, and do not turn your back.
 - If bitten call EMS, do not try to restrain the animal.

Unsafe Situations

Weapons

- Assume that every home has a weapon of some kind and that every client can access a weapon.
- Look for weapons as you enter.
- Guns are often in bedrooms, knives are in the kitchen.
- Pay attention to the client for signs of becoming more agitated or that a situation is starting to escalate.
- Be ready to leave if you feel the situation is out of control.

Unsafe Situations

Mental Health and Substance Abuse

- Untreated Mental Health and Substance disorders are not uncommon in the underserved populations that public health workers interact with.
- People with these conditions can behave unpredictably, and may be quick to escalate conflict.
- While not necessarily a threat, clients (and bystanders) that are acting erratically can draw unwanted attention to your presence.
- Know your agency's policies on dealing with active substance use and mental illness, and any available treatment resources in your area.

Staying Safe in Unsafe Situations



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

Our Mission: To protect and improve the health and environment of all Kansans.

Staying Safe in Unsafe Situations

Anatomy of Hazards/Crime

- **Motive:** The reason or intention behind the attempt to harm someone.
- **Means:** The tools necessary to cause harm.
- **Opportunity:** Circumstances that allow the harm to occur.

Staying Safe in Unsafe Situations

Anatomy of Hazards/Crime (cont.)

We prevent harm and increase safety through:

- Practicing behaviors that will prevent or reduce the Motives, Means, and Opportunities for harm that we will encounter in the field;
 - Adequate preparation limits the Opportunity for harm, can reduce preventable Means such as weather conditions and occupational exposures, and reduce Motives for harm by making ourselves a less-appealing target.

Staying Safe in Unsafe Situations

Anatomy of Hazards/Crime (cont.)

We prevent harm and increase safety through:

- Preparing ourselves to identify hazards and respond in ways that increase the probability of favorable outcomes;
 - Policies, Procedures, and Training are necessary to establish clear responses to hazardous situations, enabling public health workers to act quickly when faced with such circumstances.

Staying Safe in Unsafe Situations

Conflict Management

- If an encounter becomes escalated, talk with the person and encourage them to engage with you in a discussion to help calm the situation.
- An escalation in conflict represents a trigger of the other person's "Fight or Flight" reflex; you are being viewed as a threat.
- Your objective should be to show that you are not a threat until you can leave, or the angry person "comes down" from their anger.
- Be patient – even if it appears the person is calming down, it can take a person up to 30-40 minutes to physiologically calm down from anger.

Staying Safe in Unsafe Situations

Conflict Management (DOs)

- You must remain calm. Speak slowly with a steady tone of voice to maintain control of the conversation.
- Reinforce your calm tone with non-threatening, non-confrontational body language (arms down, palms visible)
- Avoid extensive eye contact and physical closeness.
- Make reflective/empathic statements that summarize their feelings such as, “So you are angry because...”
- Once the conflict has been de-escalated, offer any suggestions or solutions to the problem in the form of a question; “Would it be possible...”

Staying Safe in Unsafe Situations

Conflict Management (DON'Ts)

- Don't make defensive counter-arguments; this will reinforce their perception of you as a threat.
- Don't tell the person to “calm down”; instead, be empathetic. Talk about the frustration or problem that has come up.
- Don't offer solutions to an angry person. Until the person has calmed down, you should be acknowledging and reflecting.

Staying Safe in Unsafe Situations

Escape and Resistance

- Unfortunately, we must acknowledge that, no matter what we do to prevent or de-escalate a situation, someone may still seek to harm us during the course of our work.
- Always leave when you feel threatened or that you are in a situation beyond your control.
- If you think you are being followed, change your path, cross the street, or walk in another direction. Go into a store or well-populated area if possible.

Staying Safe in Unsafe Situations

Escape and Resistance

- If you are confronted, robbed, or assaulted, remember that **YOUR LIFE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING!!**
- Fight for your **LIFE**, not your property. If its property they want – give it to them.
- If someone tries to harm you, sexually assault you, or abduct you; make a scene. Make noise, kick, scream; fight back in any way you can.
- Don't do anything to provoke an attacker; do everything you can to make them happy so you can leave the area.
- Call 911 and follow your program procedures.

Lessons Learned at KDHE

- Disease Intervention Specialists (DIS) often work in neighborhoods where the crime rate is high. However, few instances of actual violence have ever been directed at DIS during the course of their work.
- This reflects not only the DIS's alertness and confidence, but also the tendency for neighborhood residents to protect the people that are perceived to be helping them.

Lessons Learned at KDHE

Trust Your Instincts

- You can always come back later with a coworker. You should never enter a situation alone when something doesn't feel right about it.
- When things are a little weird, try to conduct your activities on a porch/patio or in the doorway without going completely inside.
- Don't be afraid to leave a visit unfinished if things get weird or scary.

Lessons Learned at KDHE

Make Safety a Procedure

- Everyone in the program should be on the same page regarding the safety and accountability policies for staff operating in the field.
- Your program should develop clear, written policies that outline the following:
 - The methods, timing/frequency, and circumstances in which field staff are expected to communicate their location and activities to a supervisor or coworker.
 - The roles and actions necessary for other program staff to resolve or respond to situations where field staff have failed to “check in” appropriately.

Questions?

“Your safety is important to the program and the health department for which you work. We must not allow concerns about safety to inhibit our ability to do the job. Most people avoid trouble through common sense...”

-STD Employee Development Guide, 1994