



Planning for Victim and Worker Safety

An adult protective services (APS) worker receives an anonymous telephone call about an 81-year-old woman. The caller reports that she has not seen her neighbor in over a week, mail and newspapers are stacking up, and a strong, unpleasant smell is coming from the house. She also reports that the neighbor's dog is barking continuously.

The worker immediately drives to the house to investigate. She parks in the driveway, walks up to the door, and rings the bell. She can hear the dog barking. She knocks again and announces she is from Protective Services and is checking on a report of abuse. A large man smelling strongly of alcohol opens the door. He is holding a shotgun.

Fortunately, this is not a typical home visit. Usually the worker can meet the victim, and even the alleged perpetrator, without threat of harm or violence. However, in a few cases, entering a home where the perpetrator is present can be dangerous for the worker and may actually increase the risk of serious harm or death to the victim.

Law enforcement officers also meet people in their homes in times of crisis. Officers have long recognized that domestic and family violence calls are among the most difficult and dangerous runs they receive. These calls are further complicated by the presence of alcohol and other drugs, weapons, and high emotions. Officers receive rigorous training in the tactics of approach and entry, locating and maintaining control of all parties, searching for and seizing weapons, and responding to shows of force or resistance. They are also armed and in regular radio contact with their agency. They call for backup if they suspect that a situation may turn dangerous or volatile.

Domestic violence advocates and other professionals are trained to create safety plans with victims of family abuse. This planning process assists victims in considering a variety of situations where they may encounter their abuser (e.g., at home, at work/volunteer setting, on the street). Victims analyze and decide on which available options they will try to protect themselves and their loved ones (including pets).

National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL)

A Project of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin

1245 E. Washington Ave., Suite 150, Madison, Wisconsin 53703

Phone: 608-255-0539 • Fax/TTY: 608-255-3560 • www.ncall.us • www.endabusewi.org

Most service providers working in the aging field or adult protective services have limited training in how to evaluate for danger, plan proactively for their own and the client's safety, and respond to a developing dangerous situation. This article will discuss ways workers who make home visits can assess for danger and develop approaches to enhance personal and client safety.

This article is written for workers and advocates (excluding law enforcement) who go to the homes of elderly and vulnerable adults. The focus is on clients living in the community rather than in institutions. Other professionals, such as home health workers, visiting nurses and physical therapists, friendly visitors, case managers, other community based service providers, conservators and guardians may also find the information thought provoking and relevant.

Why Home Visits Can Be Dangerous

Abuse, particularly physical violence and stalking, often escalates when an abuser believes the victim is ending the relationship or getting assistance. Perpetrators may see the worker as interfering in personal, family affairs or trying to build a criminal case. If the worker is focusing on the client's needs or providing accurate information and options, the abuser may feel threatened. Any intervention perpetrators perceive as lessening their power or control over the victim may be sabotaged. While a variety of tactics may be employed, they may well include increased abuse or threats to the victim and/or the worker.

Research indicates that some abusers of seniors are chemically dependent, mentally ill or cognitively impaired. An abuser's judgment may be clouded. In addition, some of these conditions may make the abuser more inclined to be abusive to a visiting worker.

Some elder abuse perpetrators have long criminal records. Abusers may own a variety of weapons, including trained attack animals. On a daily basis these weapons are used to control victims and discourage them from leaving. They also can be effective in frightening away any potential help.

The neighborhood may be dangerous. Homes may be in crime-ridden areas, remote locations where no one is nearby and where cellular telephones do not work, and places where outsiders are not wanted.

For these and other reasons, home visits can be dangerous. If they are dangerous for the worker, they are doubly so for the victim who lives with those circumstances every day and unlike the worker, may have little choice whether to stay or go. There are steps that a worker can take to enhance safety when preparing for a visit, arriving at the home, entering, conducting the interview, and sensing possible problems. There are additional actions the worker can suggest when assisting victims to plan how to increase their own safety.

PREPARATION

Receiving the Call

When a caller provides information about possible abuse, the worker always should ask questions about safety. These include questions about prior calls for service, number of occupants, weapons, substance abuse, any known mental health history, and presence of dangerous animals. The following questions may be helpful as a guide:

- Is the victim in immediate danger? Should 911 be called?
- What is known about this location?
- Are there prior reports of abuse or neglect at the residence?
- Has the caller ever called APS or law enforcement before about this situation?
- Have local law enforcement officials been called to the house before? When? For what?
- Does the caller know if there are any court orders in effect to protect anyone at the house?
- Does the reporting party have the names of the residents?
- Does the caller know if anyone currently is at home?
- Did the caller provide information about who lives at the house or regularly visits or stays there?
- Are any of these persons known to have or use guns? Other weapons?
- Are any of the residents especially fixated on weapons?
- Are any involved with martial arts or boxing?

- Is anyone associated with the residence known to use drugs?
- Does the caller know if anyone at the house has mental problems? Been the subject of mental health proceedings?
- Did anyone get information about what kind of dog lives at the house? Is it known to be ferocious or timid? Where is the dog typically located? Inside the house or outside? Where is it now?
- Are there any other dangerous animals known to be at the location?

The worker should check additional sources to see if anything else is known about the location or parties including prior calls and any open or closed files within the agency. If a worker receives information indicating that a significant number of high risk factors are present, she should avoid responding alone, and, upon entry, should devote time to discussing danger, options, including leaving, and safety planning with the victim.

Leaving the Office

Workers should also take steps to enhance their personal safety before leaving the office. They should notify office staff where they are going and update the information upon arrival at the location and again as they leave. If workers continue on to other sites, they should continue to check in and update their information.

In the field, service providers should carry appropriate safety devices such as flashlights and a fully charged cellular phone. The cellular phone should have a button set for the local law enforcement agency's emergency number. Workers should know how to contact law enforcement for a rapid response and what to say to assure a high priority response. In addition, workers may have a code word to use if they feel unsafe to alert office staff of the need for help.

Where difficulty is anticipated, bring along at least one additional staff person or request local law enforcement agency accompaniment. It is preferable to have more help than is needed and to send them on their way once a situation is under control than to need help and have to wait for it to arrive. This routine law enforcement practice provides valuable guidance for service providers.

Workers should consider creating a safety plan (mentally or on paper) for themselves and the victim. Imagine the arrival at the scene, interview, and exit. What behaviors signal potential problems? What action can be taken if the victim and/or the abuser become agitated, angry or abusive? What responses enhance worker and client safety? Can emergency housing be found if the victim chooses to leave immediately?

Finally, do not make assumptions. Even if the case is presented as self-neglect, dangerous persons may be living in the home. Never assume that the vulnerable adult is not an abuser. Sometimes further investigation reveals that the caregiver or spouse/partner is actually the victim.

ON ARRIVAL

Upon arrival, decide where is the safest place to park. Assess the neighborhood. Is it safe to park out of view of the destination? Avoid driveways where a worker can be blocked in by other vehicles. Parking in front of the residence may telegraph the worker's arrival to a potential abuser. If safe to do so, park a short distance away so the worker can watch the premises, scan the area, and listen while approaching. By arriving more quietly the worker can be more safely positioned at the door.

Stand to the side of the door rather than directly in front of it. Notice which way the door opens and attempt to stand on the side with the door hinges. Listen before and after knocking or ringing the doorbell. Are there sounds? Yelling, cries of pain, heavy objects being dragged, a weapon being thrown or discharged?

Keep the hands free. If items must be carried, place them in the weaker hand. Notebooks and equipment should be placed in cases carried over the shoulder or put on the floor or ground until it is safe to enter the premises. Consider in advance what to do if the door is quickly closed. If the call is urgent and life threatening, and if there are sufficient staff present, consider if it is appropriate to block the closing of the door by inserting a foot or flashlight. The worker should not prevent the door being closed when alone or if danger is likely, and sufficient, appropriate help is not available. Also consider legalities and whether a court order may be required before entry can be forced.

AT ENTRY

Before or immediately upon entering, workers should identify themselves, including by name of agency or function. Immediately scan visible areas for all persons, weapons, animals, and the location of closed doors. Assess the situation for danger. For example:

- How many people are present?
- Where are they?
- Is anyone intoxicated?
- Are there dangerous animals? Where?
- How will the worker leave if the situation becomes dangerous?
- Are there visible weapons?
- Where are weapons likely to be hidden?

Nearly anything can be a weapon. Consider items beyond guns, including hammers, razors, box cutters, knives, canes and bats as weapons. Whenever possible, avoid conducting interviews in kitchens. Finally, have any potentially dangerous animals moved to other locations.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Interview Parties Separately

Interviewing the victim should be done out of eye and ear contact of the alleged abuser and other parties. Victims may not feel safe talking about abuse if the abuser is present or nearby. Even if the abuser cannot hear the victim, he may control the victim's responses through looks, gestures, and body language. Many of these may be subtle and not apparent to the worker. Some abusers will interrupt the victim interview with offers of beverages, snacks, or comfort items for the worker or victim. These can be as controlling to the victim as a direct threat.

Potential danger Signs: Victim Behaviors and Lethality Indicators

The domestic violence network has provided enormous help in identifying indicators of high-risk domestic violence situations. These indicators are behaviors exhibited by the victim and the abuser. However, these risk indicators are not absolute predictors. Witnessing only a few indicators does not ensure that a situation is safe. Further, no one can predict whether a particular person will be

dangerous at a particular point in time. Rather, all the circumstances and the particular situation must be considered. Workers must use their best judgment.

Common behaviors by **victims** that may indicate danger or fear:

- Insisting that the worker leave
- Acting fearfully
- Looking to abuser to answer all questions
- Being forthcoming in the beginning of interview and then becoming reticent or recanting (Abusers often signal to victims through verbal or nonverbal cues to stop talking or change story. These cues may go unnoticed by the worker.)
- Saying they are afraid, asking the worker to stay or asking to leave
- Evidence of recent physical or sexual abuse
- Refusal to answer questions

Common risk factors associated with danger and lethality include by **abuser**:

- Use of alcohol and other drugs
- Suicide and/or homicide-suicide ideation and attempts
- Access to weapons
- Centrality of the victim to the abuser's existence
- Jealousy and obsessiveness
- Threats to kill
- History of violence
- Increased frequency of violent incidents
- Sexual assault
- Pet abuse
- Belief s/he has lost everything and has nothing to live for
- Changes in reaction (person who refused to accept certain outcomes now does so)
- "Secret is now known" i.e., previously hidden abuse is now public and/or the abuser no longer cares where abuse occurs or who knows about it

- “Triggering events” i.e., important dates in the relationship (e.g., anniversaries, holidays, court dates such as order was served, a court, sentencing, or surrender date, a new will, or elder has separated from the abuser).

Finally, the worker should always consider personal instincts and reactions. Does the worker feel rushed? Afraid? Does something not feel right? Is anyone becoming overly tense or defensive? How is the victim reacting to the abuser? What batterer tactics may be employed by the abuser against the worker? Manipulation through charm and friendliness to get the worker to leave the home? Minimizing and denying abusive behavior? Even if relatively few risk indicators are present, if there is a belief that the situation is dangerous, workers should trust their instincts and act accordingly.

If the Situation Escalates

If one party becomes angry and begins to leave the room, find a reason to follow him to assure that he is not arming himself. Should the situation become unsafe, the worker should always have an pre-planned emergency exit plan that does not endanger the client, other witnesses, or the worker.

If the worker or the client is in immediate danger, (threats, weapons, assault), find a reason to leave the home and call 911. For worker safety, consider driving to the nearest police or sheriff’s department. If that is not feasible, the worker should go to a nearby area where people congregate, such as a shopping center, grocery store, library, or open business.

When calling a 911 operator, the worker should explain to the dispatcher the purpose of the visit, what has occurred, what the worker needs, and the worker’s location. Indicate if the worker or the victim needs medical attention. Indicate if anyone is in danger, if anyone is armed, and the last known location of the abuser. This information will assist the operator in properly designating the call, assigning it an appropriate response priority, and dispatching sufficient help to deal with it.

If tension is present but the worker does not feel immediate danger, the worker should attempt to de-escalate the situation. It may be helpful to shift the focus of the interview to rapport building rather than the investigation. If parties are upset, it is usually best not to touch them. The worker should avoid (additional) confrontations. The worker’s demeanor can also help reduce tension by

remaining outwardly calm, speaking slowly, quietly and clearly, and by avoiding unexpected or hurried actions.

The worker should talk to the victim outside of eye and ear contact of the abuser to find out if the victim is fearful and wants to leave immediately. This is an opportunity to do safety planning with the victim. This could include discussing how the victim could call 911, the worker's agency, or a domestic abuse help line if victim needs assistance. The worker must always respect a competent victim's decision to stay. It is worth recalling that leaving can be the most dangerous time for a victim who lives with domestic violence. Separation violence is closely associated with escalating domestic violence, stalking, and homicide. The worker should return as soon as possible with law enforcement and/or another worker to separate the victim and abuser and to talk with the victim. If possible, leave a cell phone programmed to 911 with victim.

Safety Planning

As part of, or following the investigative or other interview, the worker should assist elder victims in enhancing their own safety by creating a safety plan. The creation of a safety plan is an outcome of a process in which victims determine a plan of action to follow in case of a dangerous situation with their abusers in a variety of situations (during an abusive incident, in public, in their homes). The process enhances future safety, gives victims ideas of strategies to use, and restores to them some control over their lives. While the exact plan is one an individual victim creates, workers can provide critical support and guidance to victims as the plan is made. The worker can assist victims by discussing some of the key components listed below with them. For a more complete guide, workers should contact their local domestic violence program.

Planning for an Explosive Incident

- Practice getting out of home safety if possible
- Have a few things packed and ready. (Some critical items include clothes, medications, glasses and other assistive items, identification, keys, money)
- Plan ahead where to go, if leaving is necessary.
- Who could call the police or 911? (Does victim have a cell phone or lifeline button?)

- How will care be provided if abuser is caregiver?

Preparing to Leave

- Open a saving account and/or post office box
- Pack some items like money, extra keys, copies of important documents and medications
- Determine who can help
- If victim is isolated, work on building a support network
- Have emergency numbers available
- Plan for transportation to leave an abusive situation or seek support.
- Does victim have a pet? Where will the pet go?

Safety in the home (if abuser has left)

- Have locks changed
- Devise a plan for dependents living in the home (grandchildren, parents)
- Inform neighbors, landlord, and other individuals
- Change telephone number and e-mail address
- Screen telephones calls
- Watch for stalking behavior

Safety with a protective/restraining order

- Get information on obtaining a protective order from a local domestic violence program
- Victims should keep the protective order with them at all times.
- Inform trusted individuals that about a protective order.
- Copy should be on file with local law enforcement agency

Safety in public

- Devise a plan for when victim is out in public.
- Carry a cellular telephone programmed to 911.
- Discuss safety planning at work or volunteer site.

- Suggest changing routine and route.

Safety and Emotional Health

- If contact with the abuser is necessary, arrange any communication with abuser in the safest way possible (e.g., e-mail, phone, in the company of another person)
- Have positive thoughts about self
- Take care of physical needs
- Read or listen to uplifting books or music
- Decide who can give support.
- Attend a women's or victims support group.

Things to bring if leaving may include some of the following:

Documentation: Such as protective order, driver's license, ID, birth certificates, Social Security card, award letter, proof of disability, work permit, green card, passport, divorce papers, lease, rental agreement or house deed, car registration/insurance.

Transportation: Fixed route bus pass, mobility Id or special transits ID card

Financial: Money, bank books, checkbooks, credit cards, ATM cards and mortgage payment book, food stamps

Medical: Insurance, Medicaid, medical assistance, clinic card, medical records, doctors orders and prescriptions

Adaptive equipment: Service animals, wheelchairs, shower bench, crutches, communication devices, urology supplies, glasses, hearing aids, and assistive devices

General items: Keys (house/car/office); personal items like address book, pictures, jewelry and items of sentimental value, supplies for service animals, toiletries

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is not to create fear but rather to suggest relatively simple steps the worker can take to reduce the likelihood of facing dangerous situations. Actions that enhance worker safety can also increase client safety because those factors that make situations dangerous for professionals also make the situation dangerous for the client who lives in that home. Workers enhance their own safety by anticipating problems and planning how to respond. Workers can assist their clients to do the same through thoughtful safety planning. When both workers and their clients plan ahead both are safer and more able to effectively respond to danger.

Written by Candace J. Heisler and Bonnie Brandl