

## Safety Policy and Procedures

The Andrews University Department of Social Work Field Education Program (Department) has adopted the following policy and procedures regarding the safety of social work students in the field. This policy has been created to recognize that violence in the lives of clients can create potential dangers to professional social workers and students engaged in the study of the profession. While social workers and students may be more aware of these issues in urban areas, we believe issues of safety are relevant in all communities and settings. We urge social work students to become familiar with this policy regardless of the location of your field practicum location.

### I. Policy

- a) The Department is responsible for providing all students and faculty liaisons with general written information about safety in field practicum.
- b) The Department expects each agency to be responsible for orienting student(s) to the safety policies and procedures of that agency and setting. Such orientation should include, but not be limited to, discussion of safety issues in the community, within the agency building(s), with particular clients prone to violent behavior, and about clients who may be sharing living quarters with persons prone to violent behavior, to the extent that such information is known. Security of personal belongings of the social work intern while at the agency should be also covered. Procedures for the student(s) to follow in the event of a safety or security problem should be reviewed at the beginning of the placement with ample opportunity for questions and discussion as needed.
- c) Student(s) should not be required to engage or to remain in assignments or at placements in which they feel physically at risk. The Department urges all agencies to make the same accommodations to ensure students' safety as they make for their own agency staff and in some situations the agency may need to make even greater accommodation for a student. If a student's concerns about safety interfere in whole or in part with the learning process, the faculty liaison should be contacted by the field instructor to facilitate prompt exploration of the concerns and to seek a mutually satisfying resolution.

### II. Procedures

- a) If an incident occurs in which a student is personally threatened or hurt it is the student's responsibility to notify the field instructor immediately. The field instructor, agency contact person, or agency director should then contact the Director of Field Education immediately to discuss what actions the agency and the Department should take to ensure the student's physical and emotional well-being in the wake of the incident and on a going-forward basis.
- b) The Director of Field Education will document the incident and the steps taken to address it and will meet with the student and faculty liaison to assess the student's readiness to return to the field, and any other issues relevant to the situation. The Director of Field Education may alert the Department Chair about incidents and concerns on an as-needed basis.

### III. Safety Guidelines for Students in the Field

#### **a) Agency Protocol**

It is important for students to know the agency's safety and security protocol for office and home

visits with clients prior to the start of the placement. If the agency does not have safety and security policies and/or procedures the field instructor and student should review and discuss any issues related to safety and security in the setting. Social Work students are urged to bring their questions and concerns to their field instructor. Regular communication particularly about safety concerns is strongly encouraged.

The following are guidelines and suggestions that may be helpful to students, field instructors, and faculty liaisons as they consider the particular safety issues in their settings. Specific steps taken by students or agency personnel will obviously have to be determined by the individual situation, the nature of the setting, etc.

### **b) Security of Belongings**

All students in the field are expected to have a secure place to keep coats, handbags, cell phones, laptops, and other belongings while at placement. It is preferable that the space be one that can be locked, and could be in a desk drawer or filing cabinet. Students should not leave handbags and other personal articles visible and unattended, even in an office with the door closed.

Valuables should not be brought to placement settings. Items of value should not be left in cars, and should not be placed out of view just prior to leaving a vehicle. Neither the agency nor the Department can be responsible for lost, stolen or damaged personal items.

### **c) Safety Issues Related to Working with Clients**

When working with clients, it is important to remember that the treatment process often makes people feel vulnerable and may challenge their usual coping mechanisms. With some people, this can contribute to problems with impulse control, and can raise issues of safety for the client, the social worker, the student and others.

There may be times when student's work with individuals who have difficulty with reality testing, dealing with overwhelming emotions, and controlling their anger. Some of them may be prone to violence and may possess a weapon. Other clients may be intoxicated, high on drugs, in withdrawal, or may have other medical or neurological disorders. Again, we urge all students to consult with their agency field instructors to prepare adequately for handling specific situations that are potentially difficult or threatening, such as medical emergencies, suicide or homicide risks, potential abuse of others, and the presence of weapons.

### **d) Safety Guidelines for Office Meetings**

If a student will be meeting with a client with whom the student does not feel safe, it is important for the student to discuss the situation promptly and fully with their field instructor. Based on the outcome of this discussion, there may be a decision that a student will not see the client or see the client under specific circumstances or controls. However, if it is decided that a student will see the client, several points should be considered. A client's mental status should be assessed. When considering location of the meeting, it might be helpful to think about what is in the room, whether there is more than one exit, and where each person might sit. It may also be helpful to think about whether to include someone else in the meeting, and what to wear. When discussing the time of the appointment, it can be helpful to think about whether or not many people are around at the time being considered for the meeting. It is also important to discuss the plan for backup and assistance in the event that the client becomes agitated. A student should never see a potentially dangerous client alone without someone else in the agency knowing about the client,

the appointment time and the location of the appointment. Students should keep supervisors informed about their schedules at the agencies at all times.

#### **e) Safety Guidelines for Travel by Car**

When a student is traveling by car to an agency or to home visits, it is advisable to know where he or she is going, and to look at a map before driving to unfamiliar areas. In general, remember to be alert, and to lock doors and close windows. The student should tell someone where he or she is going and the expected amount of time she/he will be away from the office. The agency should have your cell phone number or other information on how to contact you in the event of an emergency.

#### **f) Safety Guidelines for Travel by Foot or Public Transportation**

When traveling by foot or public transportation, it is advisable that students know where they are going and the route by which they will travel. Students are encouraged to carry the least amount of valuables with them as possible. Money, license, keys, and other essentials might be carried in a pocket. If a handbag carried under the arm is grabbed, it is best to let go of it. It is helpful to dress in comfortable clothes that are loose fitting, and to wear sturdy, flat walking shoes. It is also helpful to be alert, and to walk with a purpose, as if one has a clear destination. One should be aware of people in the immediate area.

#### **g) Safety Guidelines for Home Visits**

It is important to familiarize yourself with the client's file prior to the home visit. If there is a question of safety, plan accordingly with field instructors. It might be decided that meeting at a neutral location or going with another worker is the appropriate plan. Someone at the agency should always know the student's itinerary. It is helpful to stay alert and think about what to wear, which room to meet in, and where to sit. If a student ever feels threatened at any point during the interview, they are encouraged to err on the side of caution and appropriately terminate the visit. If clients seem to feel threatened by the student entering their dwelling, the student should desist and not force the issue. If a student hears a heated argument from inside the house or apartment, the student may decide to re-schedule the visit or call to assess the situation before entering the dwelling. A student should never see a potentially dangerous client alone without someone else in the agency knowing about it. In general, a cell phone is very useful for students doing home visits.

#### **h) Health Safety**

Students should be alerted to the existence of biohazards. They should receive training and information about how to protect themselves from infectious diseases.

#### **IV. Post Incident Protocol**

If an incident occurs in which a student is personally threatened or hurt, the field instructor, agency contact person, or agency director should contact the Director of Field Education immediately to discuss what actions the agency and University should take to ensure the student's physical and emotional well-being.

The Director of Field Education will document the incident and the steps taken to address it, and meet with the student and faculty liaison. Together, they will assess the student's readiness to return to the field and any other issues relevant to the situation.

*Andrews University Department of Social Work thanks Simmons School of Social Work for sharing their safety policy which was used to develop this safety policy.*