



Boston University School of Social Work
Field Education Department

Safety Policy and Procedures

Introduction

The Field Education Department oversees the students' experiences in their field placements and their safety in the field. The following guidelines, procedures and tips were created in recognition of the fact that physical vulnerability of professional social workers and violence in the lives of clients/consumers/communities are current realities. This policy clarifies the respective roles of the School, the agency and the student with the goal of collaboration to maximize safe practice. While social workers may be more aware of these issues in inner-city areas, we believe issues of safety are relevant in all communities and settings.

Responsibilities and Roles

Boston University School of Social Work will:

- Provide students with an overview of safety in the field through the Integrative Field Seminar.
- Provide students with a copy of the School's Safety Policy and Procedures.
- Provide a workshop for students to teach knowledge and skills that promotes safe social work practice.
- Encourage faculty to incorporate content related to safety into lectures and discussions in the classroom.
- Provide training to faculty advisors about student safety and orientation to the School's Safety Policy and Procedures. Faculty advisors will discuss safety issues at the site visit.
- Offer workshops that address social worker safety to field placement agencies through the BUSSW Professional Education Programs, New England Consortium of Field Education Directors (NECON) Professional Development Series, and other continuing education opportunities provided by the Field Education Department.

Field Placement Agencies will:

- Orient students to the safety policies and procedures of the agency. Such orientation should include, but not be limited to, discussion of safety issues in the community, within the agency building(s), and with particular clients. Security of personal belongings should be included. Students should also be informed of and trained in health precautions and protocols appropriate for the setting. Procedures for the student(s) to follow in the event of a safety or security problem should be reviewed.
- Include in the learning contract information about the agency's orientation to safety and the training opportunities it provides to students to develop skills and knowledge that will maximize safe social work practice.
- Not require students to engage in assignments in which they feel physically at risk.
- Make the same accommodations to ensure students' safety as they make for staff.
- Contact the student's faculty advisor if the student's concerns about safety interfere with the learning process. In consultation with the faculty advisor (and in some instances with a member of the Field Education staff) develop a plan that addresses the student's educational needs and the agency's requirement to provide services.

Social Work Students should:

- Read and be familiar with the safety policy and procedures of the School and of the agency where they are placed and abide by health precautions and protocols related to the specific agency setting.
- Attend orientation, workshops and training programs related to safety and safe social work practice offered at the School and at their agency.
- Read and be familiar with the *Safety Tips for Students in the Field*.
- Not engage in assignments in which they feel physically at risk. If a student is concerned about his/her safety, the student should inform the field instructor. The faculty advisor and field instructor should consult to determine the best course of action to support the student's education.

Procedures for Reporting an Incident

- If an incident occurs in which a student is threatened or hurt, the field instructor, agency contact person, or agency director should contact the Assistant Dean for Field Education immediately to discuss what actions the agency and School should take to ensure the student's physical and emotional well-being.
- The Assistant Dean for Field Education will document the incident and the steps taken to address it. She will meet with the student and faculty advisor to discuss the situation, assess the immediate and ongoing risk, and find a resolution that promotes the student's sense of well-being and the learning process.

Safety Tips for Students in the Field

Agency Protocol

It is important for students to know the agency's protocol for safety and security. The following are guidelines and suggestions that may be helpful to students, field instructors, and faculty advisors 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. The agency should know the student's schedule and whereabouts at all times, especially when the student is working outside the building.

Security of Belongings

The agency is responsible for providing students with a secure place to keep 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 cell phones, laptops, backpacks, purses 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.

Safety Issues Related to Working with Clients

Social work students work with clients/consumers in a range of settings and situations. Some of these include work with individuals dealing with overwhelming emotions and environmental stressors that result in behaviors that are threatening or appear to be threatening to the student. These behaviors may include (but are not limited to) swearing, yelling, insulting, threatening or acting to cause physical harm, and other out-of-control behavior.

Some individuals may be prone to violence and may possess a weapon. Others may be intoxicated, high on drugs, in withdrawal, or may have other medical, psychiatric or neurological disorders. Again, we would like to emphasize that students should always consult with agency field instructors regarding preparation for and handling of 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.

Safety Tips for Office Meetings

When considering the location of an office meeting, it is important to consider what is in the room, whether there is more than one exit, and where each person will sit. When scheduling the appointment, it is helpful to think about whether other people will be around and available at the time of the meeting for help if needed. Also, it is important to have a plan for assistance in the event that the client/consumer becomes agitated. This may include having another staff person in the meeting.

Clothing that is provocative is never appropriate and, in some instances, may impede one's ability to act in an unsafe situation, e.g., high heeled shoes, tight skirts, long scarves. Jewelry can also be used to injure the worker.

Safety Tips for Travel

When a student is traveling by car for field education activities, it is advisable to have clear directions and know where he or she is going. In general, it is important to be alert and attentive to one's surroundings, and to lock doors and close windows. Valuables should be placed out of sight in one's vehicle prior to parking at the destination.

When traveling by foot or public transportation, it is advisable that students carry as little as possible. Money, license, keys, and other essentials should be carried in a pocket if possible. If a bag or briefcase is grabbed, it is best to let go of it. It is advisable 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, without staring or maintaining eye contact.

Safety Tips for Home Visits

Prior to making a home visit, the student should discuss any issues related to safety with the field instructor. On an initial home visit it is often advisable to go with another worker. Most agencies will want to know the location and scheduling of the home visits. Some agencies require a confirming telephone call upon arrival and departure from the home visit. If the student feels unsafe upon arrival or at any time during the visit s/he should not proceed with the meeting. It might be preferable to meet at a neutral location.