



Safety Planning Policy and Protocol

Safety planning is an essential part of our contact with all survivors, regardless of whether they are still with an abuser, trying to leave, or have left the abuser. Safety planning includes helping to assess danger, particular points of vulnerability, and best approaches to increasing safety. Advocates should work to ensure that survivors are assisted with safety planning in all of the following contexts:

- Short term or long term contact
- When working with a survivor on a crisis call
- When a survivor calls for emergency housing and we are unable to house her
- When a survivor has been vouchered to a motel or is about to depart
- During intake into any of our services
- Periodically throughout our work together if the survivor's circumstances change and present new potential dangers not attended to in initial plan
- When a survivor returns to their abuser
- When a survivor is coming to our offices, an outstationed location, or meeting us for accompaniment in a community-based setting

Safety planning can take many forms. It may be a short conversation/brainstorm on the phone, or it may be an extensive written plan. However, always take care not to create written information that can be found by an abuser, and ensure that community partners with whom she might be working know to keep details of the plan confidential and not part of written records.

The survivor knows best. Advocates should recognize that the survivor is the expert on her own situation, knows her abuser better than anyone, and is already doing safety planning on a regular basis as part of her survival, though she may not label it as such. *(Simply accessing our services has required safety planning!)* Our safety planning efforts begin by asking what she has already done to stay safer, and validating her efforts. The survivor should take the lead in safety planning; our job is to facilitate the process, offer information, and when she has a safe place to keep it, to help record the plan.

Brainstorming together with the survivor to amplify and assess her efforts to stay safe. Look at all that the survivor has done already and ask what parts of the plan are working. Get all of the survivor's ideas, and contribute your own when appropriate. Offer input in a way that does not direct the survivor or decide things for her. *(One effective way of to do this is by saying "Some things I have heard that worked for other women/children are....").* Between the two of you, the more ideas you come up with the better; it means more choices, options and flexibility.

One size does not fit all. Each situation is different, and different things work for different people. Be flexible in how you safety plan with survivors in order to accommodate a range of differences. Recognize the impact that cultural background, experiences, or values may play. For example, if she wants to keep attending her community church despite the fact that her abuser may be there, what can she or others do to make that safer? If she identifies as a lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, how might some traditional ways of safety planning isolate her from her community, and how can you plan around that?

Be as creative and as thorough as possible. Abusers are very creative in the tactics they use; the more creative the safety plan is, the harder it may be for an abuser to foil it. Think of specific scenarios that are likely to come up (like the abuser showing up at work or school, scheduled visitation, encountering the abuser on the street, etc.) and make sure the plan accommodates those. Some survivors face circumstances that make safety planning very challenging. For example, a woman living in an isolated rural area with no car faces a huge barrier, and it will take an inventive plan to help her safely leave.

Have back-up plans. What if plan A doesn't work? It's good to have back-up plans, especially in situations that could be very dangerous, like a sure encounter with the abuser at a custody procedure or contested restraining order hearing.

Encourage the survivor to involve others in her plan. Safe people who know the plan, are part of it, or are aware of the situation may increase the survivor's safety. Safe people may include neighbors, landlords, family, friends, school staff, and co-workers. It is up to the survivor to decide who is safe, but this is usually someone who will not disclose ANY information to the abuser and who is supportive of the survivor.

Make sure to incorporate children in safety planning. Children can be helped to make their own safety plans in addition to being considered in the mother's. Think of the kids at every step in the plan. For example, is the school aware that dad should not pick the children up from school, or should they transfer to a new school? Do children know how to call 911, and where to hide if violence starts? Do they know not to intervene in the violence? Do they know not to answer the phone at the shelter, and not to tell anyone where the shelter is?

Safety planning with DHS. DHS is very concerned about client safety and may base decisions about a survivor's benefits or custody on whether she is acting in a manner they regard as promoting safety. Caseworkers often want compliance with a safety plan to be part of the survivor's service agreement. Problems may arise around this if the caseworker and survivor disagree about what she needs to do to be safe. Secondly, the case plans are in files that can be subpoenaed, making them accessible to the abuser's attorney. Advocates should be aware of what DHS is requiring of the survivor and work with DHS caseworkers to support the survivor's expertise about the best safety plan for her.

Restraining orders may not always be part of a good safety plan. It is critical to respect the survivor's assessment of whether a restraining order would be helpful or perhaps further endanger her. Protective orders can be effective if the abuser is likely - out of fear or respect for the law - to honor it. However, abusers may respond to being served with a protective order with outrage and violence. Many of them know that it is only a piece of paper and that it can't really do anything to physically stop them. If a survivor opts for a restraining order or stalking protective order, she should report and document any and all violations. She should also keep copies of the order (and a photo of the abuser) in as many safe places as possible - at work, in the car, at home, friends and family's houses, and always on her person.

The reality is that nothing can really guarantee the survivor's safety. Safety planning is one of the most effective tools we can offer to help the survivor reduce the risk of injury or death to herself and her children. But no matter how intricate and well thought out a safety plan may be, it doesn't ensure safety. Be honest about this with survivors in order to avoid creating a false sense of safety.

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