

Meeting Survivors in the Community: Tips and Tools for Mobile Advocacy

What is mobile advocacy? Advocates are proactive and creative, working with survivors on any needs that they might have. This includes going to appointments together (housing, child welfare, legal, medical or other appointments), and being strong supports. Advocates meet survivors where it is safe and convenient for them, in coffee shops, the park, and in their homes.

Get prepared:

- Carefully consider where you can have the most productive conversation (e.g. if survivor is in shared housing it might be hard to have privacy).
- Each time you plan a visit, talk with the survivor about:
 - The location that will work the best.
 - Where they will feel most comfortable.
 - What will be the safest.
 - What needs to be in place for confidentiality.
- Deciding when to get together should be collaborative. All visits are voluntary and the survivor's availability is a priority. If they find your meetings helpful and useful, they will welcome your time together!
- Think about what boundaries should be put into place. Be flexible but clear about your availability to meet with survivors or respond to phone calls. Develop a plan with survivors for who to reach out to if they need support after work hours, on the weekend, or when you are away on vacation.
- Check in about transportation costs and access. The survivor may need help or financial support if they are meeting you in the community.
- Think about what cultural considerations need to be factored into the visit. If you are not sure, take time to learn more about the community's culture.

Safety for Staff and Survivors:

Think about safety issues for yourself and survivors. Make a plan and keep revisiting it.

- Have a plan for what you'll say/do if you encounter the person causing harm, friends, or family members.

- Ask how the survivor wants you to respond if someone they know sees you together and wonders who you are.
 - Sample lines that you can offer a survivor include “This person is helping me out with food” or “She is connecting me to resources for my kids.”
- Be respectful and kind to other folks you encounter but reassure the survivor you are their advocate and will keep their information confidential.
- Let your co-workers and/or supervisor know your schedule and check in before and after a visit.
- Follow your instincts and keep your cell phone charged and handy.
- If the situation seems uncomfortable or potentially dangerous, talk with your supervisor about additional safety strategies to use.

Meeting in Someone’s Home:

Get Organized:

- ✓ Try to avoid visits near a mealtime.
- ✓ Bring a bottle of water.
- ✓ Bring a folder with things you might need, but don’t take up a lot of space.
- ✓ Avoid clipboards, backpacks, an agency name tag or anything else that is distancing.
- ✓ Give yourself extra time to get there so you are on time and not stressed.
- ✓ Dress casually and comfortably; set the tone that you are equals, working together toward shared goals.
- ✓ Give the survivor your work phone or cell phone number in case they need to cancel.

When meeting in someone’s home create an atmosphere that is:

- Relaxed.
 - Fosters a sense of genuine concern and sincere interest.
 - Works toward gaining trust.
 - Doesn’t bombard the survivor with questions.
 - Shows respect for their perspective and decisions.
- If children are curious and want to be in on the visit, ask if going for a walk or the park would be helpful while you talk.

- Ask open-ended questions about the survivor’s interests, what they love about their children, their hopes, etc. so you are not just focusing on ‘work.’
- Avoid times of the day that are distracting or potentially disruptive, like during meal times or kids’ bedtimes.
- Survivors may feel they need to clean house for you, or “host” you. Look for ways to be helpful. Depending upon relationships and circumstances, you may offer to help make dinner, do dishes, or feed the kids.
- Survivors may offer you food. Try to figure out if this could be a potential burden or if it is culturally important to share food together.
- Sometimes survivors aren’t home when you get there, or the situation has changed, or they have changed their mind about your visit. Remain open and flexible, and offer to change the meeting date or location if needed.

Remember: a home visit is not a home inspection!

- Clarify the visit’s purpose.
- Don’t comment on how the place looks, unless it’s to compliment.
- Assure the survivor that you understand it can be uncomfortable to have someone in your home and that you are not there to judge.
- Talk with your supervisor if you witness concerns (drug/alcohol use, suspected child abuse or neglect, uncleanliness) in the home before taking any further action or making a report.

Tips for Supervisors:

Good mobile advocacy requires good supervision. Support your advocates’ success in deepening their relationships with survivors and their families.

- Talk with advocates about safety. Work to dispel myths around home visits not being safe. Talk about sticking points around visiting someone in their home and find strategies to overcome hesitancy.

- Talk about boundaries (including not giving out personal cell numbers or home addresses).
- Think ahead with staff about how to respond if the advocate sees a survivor in the community (like at the grocery store or bank).
- Especially in rural communities or small cultural communities, talk with advocates about existing relationships they may have with survivors and how to be clear about the role of an advocate.
- Discuss what situations might happen that wouldn't happen in an office setting.
- Set up systems for what to do if advocates have concerns around contagious diseases, drug use, unsanitary homes, or suspected child abuse and neglect.
- Have a procedure for how to handle mandated reporting for child abuse and neglect and educate advocates on what is reportable and what isn't.
- If home inspections are required, make sure advocates aren't doing them.
- Provide ongoing training about mobile advocacy best practices.



Created in collaboration with Dr. Cris Sullivan (Michigan State University)
and Kris Billhardt (Kris Billhardt Consulting).