

FIELD EDUCATION SAFETY GUIDELINES

The Field Education Office of the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) Baccalaureate Social Work Program has adopted the following policy, procedures and guidelines regarding the safety of social work students in year-long field placements. This document been created to recognize that unsafe behaviors in the lives of clients can create potential dangers to professional social workers and students. Issues of safety are relevant in all communities and settings. Students must become familiar with this document regardless of the client population or location of their field placement.

I.

- a) The Field Education Office of the Baccalaureate Social Work Program is responsible for providing all students and faculty field liaisons with general written information about safety in field placement settings.
- b) The Field Education Office of the Baccalaureate Social Work Program expects each agency to be responsible for orienting field placement students to the safety policies and procedures of that agency and setting. Such orientation should include, but not be limited to discussions on 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 students' personal belongings while at the agency should be also covered. Procedures for students to follow in the event of a safety or security problem should be reviewed by the field instructor at the beginning of the placement with ample opportunity for questions and discussion as needed.
- c) The Field Education Office of the Baccalaureate Social Work Program 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 accommodations for a student. If a student's concerns about safety interfere in whole or in part with the learning process, the faculty field liaison should be contacted by the field instructor to facilitate prompt exploration of the concerns and to seek a mutually satisfying resolution.

II.

- 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, along with the agency personnel, as directed by the agency. The field instructor, agency contact person, or agency director should then contact the Assistant Dean of Field Education or the Field Coordinator immediately to discuss what actions the agency and Field Education Faculty should take regarding the student's physical and emotional well-being in the wake of and following the incident.
- b) The Assistant Dean of Field Education or the Field Coordinator will document the incident and the steps taken to address it and will meet with the student, the field instructor, and faculty field liaison to assess the student's readiness to remain in or return to the field, and any other issues relevant to the situation. The Assistant Dean of

Field Education or the Field Coordinator may also alert the Associate Dean of the Baccalaureate Social Work Program about incidents and concerns.

c) If a student or a faculty field liaison have concerns regarding agency safety procedures for students, the Assistant Dean of Field Education or the Field Coordinator should be contacted to discuss the concerns. The Assistant Dean of Field Education or the Field Coordinator will contact the agency and field instructor for a meeting and safety evaluation and may remove the student from the placement based upon a consideration of the totality of the circumstances.

III.

a) *Agency Protocol*

It is important for students to know the agency's safety and security protocol when in the office and on home visits with clients prior to the start of the placement. If the agency does not have safety and security policies 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 the field instructor. Regular and prompt communication about safety concerns is strongly encouraged.

b) *Security of Belongings*

All students in the field placements are expected to have a secure place to store coats, handbags, cell phones, laptops, and other belongings while at the agency. 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 field 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 Baccalaureate Social Work Program or UMBC 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 social work helping 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 field placement student and others.

There may be times when students 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, under the influence of drugs, in withdrawal, or may have other physical or mental health symptoms that impair their judgment or impulse control. Again, all social work students are to consult with their field instructors to prepare adequately for handling of specific situations that are potentially difficult or threatening, such as medical emergencies, client substance abuse, 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 that may pose a safety risk, it is important for the student to discuss the situation promptly and fully with the field instructor. Based on the outcome of this discussion, there may be a decision that a student will not see the client or sees the client under specific circumstances or controls. However, if it is decided that a student will see the client, several points should be considered. Specifically, a client's mental state should be assessed. When considering the 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 other 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 field instructors and/or task supervisors informed about their schedules and whereabouts in and outside of the agencies during field placement days.

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/she is going, and to look at a map before driving to unfamiliar areas. Students should remain alert, and lock doors and close windows. The student should tell someone where he/she is going and the expected amount of time she/he will be away from the office. The agency should have the students' cell phone number or other information on how to contact the student 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 no valuables with them. 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 while refraining from seeming intrusive.

g) Safety Guidelines for Home Visits

It is important that students familiarize themselves with the clients' files prior to home visits. If there is a question of safety, students should plan accordingly with field instructors. It might be decided that meeting at a neutral place 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 to 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 visit, 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, threatening, intoxicated, belligerent, or angry client alone without someone else from the agency accompanying them. 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 from the agency about how to protect themselves from infectious diseases, should it be necessary at a particular agency.

Questions and concerns regarding the Field Education Safety Policy, Procedures, and Guidelines should be directed to the Assistant Dean for Field Education at aeiasm@umbc.edu.

The Field Education Office of the University of Maryland Baltimore County Baccalaureate Social Work Program thanks Simmons College and Boston University for sharing their safety policies which were used in developing this document.

UMBC
Office of Field Education
Safety in the Field Student Checklist

The most important thing you can do to keep yourself safe this year is to have discussion with your field instructor regarding safety. Please review this handout and find a time to discuss the topics below with your instructor. Once you have had the discussion, please have your field instructor sign and date this document, sign and date it yourself in IPT. Your faculty field liaison will then review it.

Safety questions to discuss with your field instructor:

- ___ What tips do you have for entering and leaving the building safely (especially after dark)?
- ___ Where are emergency numbers posted (police, fire, poison control)?
- ___ How does the agency deal with clients who are under the influence (drugs/alcohol)?
- ___ What is the agency's protocol for a suicidal client?
- ___ How should I handle a blood-related incident (bloody noses, etc.)?
- ___ Is there an internal code for asking for help in the agency?
- ___ What do I do if I need help while in the agency or while in the community?
- ___ What are the procedures for fire or severe weather?
- ___ How do I know if the agency is open or closed in the event of severe weather?
- ___ What should I do if a client becomes very upset or agitated?
- ___ What should I do if I think someone has a weapon?
- ___ Where should I store my personal items?
- ___ Who should I notify when I leave the agency so somebody knows where I am?
- ___ What tips do you have related to safety with regard to home visits?
- ___ What is the agency's safety protocol for addressing Covid-19 issues? How will I know if the agency is affected (opened/closed/restricted) by a Governor's Executive Order or County Order?
- ___ Does the agency have any written policies and procedures related to any of these safety issues? May I have a copy?