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The following were reviewed by the Working Group and relevant strategies contained in them were adapted, and/or included in this handbook:

- Toronto Public Health, Personal Safety Handbook
- School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh, Risk Assessment, Violent Clients and Practitioner Safety.

**Hostel Services, Version 1.0**

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1 Introduction

Working with homeless clients who live outside can pose certain challenges. Our clients, whether in a shelter or the community, are often in crisis and can display a range of cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses. They may have mental illness, unmet health needs, addictions issues and may be sleep deprived. There may be instances where an individual might seem more assertive or aggressive than you might expect.

These situations can be filled with stress and anxiety and in some instances, result in anger, hostility and aggression being directed at other clients, employees and visitors.

To maintain workplace safety in these types of environments, it is important for you to be actively involved in preventing violent incidents and reporting it in every instance. Involving everyone in the identification, assessment and control of the risk of violence, as well as the diligent reporting of incidents of violence will help reduce the unpredictability of your work environment and increase safety for everyone. The end result will be a safer work environment, even when work is conducted in the community.

Shelter, Support & Housing Administration Division (SSHA), and the City of Toronto are committed to providing a safe working environment and ensuring your safety, along with the safety of other employees and clients.

This Staff Safety Guide was jointly developed by front line and management staff with the goal of:

- Increasing your awareness of personal safety issues;
- Identifying strategies to enhance personal safety; and
- Creating a user friendly safety guide as a resource for staff.

While you read through this safety guide, keep in mind these guiding principles:

- Your personal safety always comes first
- Increased knowledge and awareness of safety hazards contributes to personal safety
- Never assume that you are in a safe environment
- Remove yourself from a situation whenever you feel something is not right (listen to your intuition)
- We are all responsible for each other’s safety
- Consider the absolute worst case scenario and work from there

The principles in this guide are for safety in general, and can be applied inside and outside of your work environment.

This guide should be read in conjunction with existing guides, manuals, procedures and protocols of your specific workplace, as well as the division’s Workplace Violence Policy, which provides more general guidance and consideration on how to prevent and respond to incidents of workplace violence.

2 Universal Safety Considerations & Resources

There are some safety considerations and resources that benefit all employees. You should familiarize yourself with the following considerations, tools and resources that are applicable and relevant, regardless of your workplace.

**Staff Identification**

All employees are provided with City of Toronto photo identification. Ensure that you have your City of Toronto Identification card, that it is worn on your person at all times, and produce it when requested. It is your responsibility to ensure that information (e.g. name, photo) is current.

**TIPS**

- City of Toronto identification is the only form of identification that is shown to a client. Other identification such as your driver’s license contains personal information (i.e., home address) and should not be shown to clients.
- When working with clients, avoid wearing the identification on your body or around your neck (e.g., use of lanyard), which could be grasped or pulled.

**Personal Attire**

Employees should dress comfortably, professionally and be aware that your choice of clothing and footwear can affect your safety. Wear comfortable, loose fitting clothing that is not restrictive to movement and appropriate to your work environment. If you are issued a work shirt, wear it to more easily identify yourself to clients and other employees.

Wear comfortable shoes that are appropriate for an unpredictable work environment. If working indoors, make sure your footwear has good treads. If working outdoors, make sure your footwear is appropriate for cold or wet weather.
If working around uneven terrain or where there is debris, construction or an encampment, wear your City of Toronto issued safety footwear.

**TIPS**
- Avoid wearing clothing or accessories that could be grasped or pulled (e.g., long neck scarves, necklaces, large hoop earrings).
- Avoid wearing open-toed shoes (e.g., sandals), as they are less versatile and provide less protection than closed-toe shoes.
- Avoid being targeted for robbery, by not wearing expensive jewellery, displaying accessories that draws attention to you, or showing large amounts of money. Religious symbols should be worn discreetly.
- Do not wear headphones as they will limit your ability to hear sounds around you.

**Safety Equipment**
Employees are required to wear the appropriate safety equipment provided to them as circumstances dictate.

If you intend to use personal protective equipment (PPE), like latex gloves, surgical masks or respirator masks, make sure you know how to properly use, maintain and discard them.

**TIPS**
- Inspect each piece of PPE before using it to ensure it is in good condition.
- Ensure you have been fit-tested on any respirator (i.e., N-95 mask) that you intend to use.

**Communication Tools**
Whether you work in shelters or in the community, situations may arise that require information to be shared quickly with staff. Your ability to maintain communication with your co-workers, supervisor and manager may decrease the potential risk to personal safety.

Make sure you are familiar with the various types of communication at your workplace, which may include:

**Radios**
Two way radios (i.e., walkie-talkies), allow for convenient and effective communication between employees in a large or spread out workplace. However, it is only as effective as the person who uses it. If your work locations uses radios make sure you know how to operate the handset, as well as understand radio protocols (e.g., avoid using radio when someone has called a code).

**TIPS**
- Make sure that the radio is working properly and the batteries are charged.
- Make sure you know how to use it (especially if you are visiting a work site other than your own).
- Make sure you know the codes that identify the three main reasons for calling for assistance (i.e., violence, medical emergency or fire). Ensure you note your location and other hazards that exist (e.g., weapons) so that other staff and responders know where you are and whether there are other dangers they will encounter.

**Phones**
Phones, including cell phones and BlackBerries, are the primary means of communication for staff while visiting clients or facilities. They also facilitate communication with the manager during after-hours investigations/events and are the quickest method for contacting 911 in an emergency.

**TIPS**
- Make sure you know how to use the phone, especially if you are visiting a work site other than your own (e.g., do you dial 9 first?).
- Make sure the cell phone is working properly and the batteries are charged before you start your shift or make your community visit.
- Be aware that cell phones may not work in elevators, underground parking areas, and in some offices and apartment buildings.
- Make sure you know where staff directory or emergency contact list is kept.
- Make sure you have your supervisor and/or manager’s phone number so that they are easy to contact in an emergency (e.g., consider programming these numbers, as well as 911 into your phone).
- Make sure your supervisor, manager or another worker has your contact number if you are working alone or in the community so that they know how to reach you.

**PA System & Alarms**
Public address systems can be used to alert the occupants of a buildings (e.g., staff and clients) of any danger and inform them of any required actions (e.g.,
Evacuate the building; restricted areas due to an incident. Panic alarms or silent alarms are also installed at some SSHA locations.

**TIPS**
- Make sure you know how to use the panic alarm or silent alarm.
- Make sure you know how to use the PA system, if that is part of your work.

**SMIS & Pirouette**
The Shelter Management Information System (SMIS) and Pirouette are capable of displaying Health and Safety alerts for particular clients and displaying facility/system-wide messages for more general concerns.

**TIPS**
If you use SMIS regularly, as part of your work:
- Make sure you read all “facility messages” (if any).
- Make sure you check for health and safety flags when looking up a client record.
- Make sure you enter relevant client information into SMIS (e.g., client triggers), as part of case management.

**Buildings**
Be aware of hazardous conditions in buildings and the surrounding environment (i.e., broken glass, discarded needles, narrow alleyways, dead-end streets). Scan the area for potential sources of injury to yourself or others.

**TIPS**
- Always ask yourself “Is this scene safe to enter?”
  Use this memory tool “fire / wire? gas / glass? drugs / thugs?” as prompts to remind you to look for potential hazards (e.g., potential sources of fire or flammable materials, gas, fumes, smoke, broken glass, drug paraphernalia like needles, unknown individuals who should not be there).
- Leave immediately if the situation is hazardous or if you feel uncomfortable.
- Report all hazards and concerns to a shift leader, supervisor or manager.

**Elevators**
Exercise caution when using elevators. Look to see who is in the elevator before entering. Do not enter the elevator if you do not feel comfortable – wait for the next one.

**TIPS**
- When in the elevator, stand beside the control panel for quick access to the alarm and to enable a quick exit if necessary.
- If a suspicious/threatening person enters the elevator, exit before the doors close.

**Hallways**
When walking down a hallway, stay in the centre if possible. Be aware of open doors and listen for doors which open as you pass.

**TIPS**
- A hallway which has a 90 degree turn needs to be approached by keeping yourself as close to the wall opposite the inside corner (see figure 1). This allows you to maximize your field of view around the corner, and to observe what or who is at the corner from a safe distance. Use spherical mirror if available, to observe upcoming hallway before arriving at the turn.
A hallway that ends in a ‘T’ should be approached in the centre of the hallway (see figure 3), slow down or stop and look in both directions. Use spherical mirror if available, to observe upcoming hallway before arriving at the turn.

Stairwells
Stairwells can provide a secluded place for illicit activities or privacy.

**TIPS**
- On entering a stairwell, look up and down, listen for voices, and activity.
- If on the bottom landing, look under the last flight of stairs if it’s exposed.
- Keep to the outside of the stairwell as this allows you to observe the next flight of stairs.
- Move at a pace which will allow you to react to an unexpected situation or person.
- If descending the stairs, be aware of any open areas on the bottom landing under the last flight of stairs.
- Never assume that a stairwell is empty, even if access is restricted.

Walking
Walk with a purpose (e.g., plan your route and know exactly where you are going). Familiarize yourself with the area beforehand, and be alert and aware of your surroundings at all times.

Follow the safest route possible. Walk on well-lit streets, on the side of the street where you can best see around you. Avoid isolated lanes/shortcuts. Be aware of slip/fall hazards, including curbs.

**TIPS**
- Keep your head up, look around and directly at people to assess them, but do not stare.
- Walk around groups of people rather than through them.
- Use the main entrances of buildings as much as possible (e.g., avoid rear or secluded entrances).
- Investigate the feasibility of City courier service with your supervisor when you need a large amount of heavy/awkward items to be delivered to a program site.
- Carry a small amount of money and identification in a front pocket to avoid having to reach into your purse or opening your wallet.
- If you suspect you are being followed, cross the street and go directly to the nearest well-lit or populated area.
- Do not go to your car or house. Walk directly and quickly, without running or looking back. If you still feel you are being followed, turn and in a loud voice, say “Stop following me.” Go to an occupied building or flag down a taxi and ask the driver to call the police. Never be afraid to draw attention to the fact that you feel at risk.
- Do not overload yourself with bags or equipment which could impede your ability to defend yourself or run.

Travelling By Car
Refer to Section 5 (Working in Community Setting), Safety Strategies.

Risk Assessment
There are several types of risk or hazard assessments that could benefit your work and workplace. These assessments are also a good opportunity for you to raise concerns you may have, or to provide feedback.

Once information has been gathered from any risk or hazard assessment, a number of controls should be put in place in response to identified risks. Even still, you must continue to assess risk as a regular part of your daily work routine.
Observation and communication skills are very important when assessing and trying to minimize risk. Any findings that deviate from what has been deemed acceptable should be immediately reported following your work location’s reporting procedures.

**Pre-Trip Assessment**
The up-front planning that you and your workplace complete for the provision of service delivery to clients in the community is critical to ensuring your safety. Elements that should be considered in the planning include:
- Assessment of a client and home prior to a visit (see page 27)
- Assessment of the geographical region and travel route (see page 29)
- Assessment of the environment and client during the visit (see page 35)

**Workplace Hazard Assessment**
SSHA’s Workplace Violence policy requires each workplace to conduct a workplace violence risk / hazard assessment, which may include risk / hazard assessment of the workplace, particular position(s) and/or working alone practices. Ensure you are aware of the workplace hazards of your workplace.

**Workplace Violence Policy**
SSHA’s Workplace Violence Policy will be reviewed annually and updated (if necessary). Make sure you review this policy to keep updated on your role, rights, and responsibilities to reduce workplace violence at your work site.

A copy of this policy should be available for any employee. Contact your supervisor or manager if you can not find a copy.

### 3. Dealing with Aggressive Individuals

Employees who interact and work with members of the public may, on occasion, meet individuals who become upset or agitated and express their feelings in a negative, aggressive manner. This behaviour can cause you to feel anxious or threatened, especially when you are alone.

Prevention of violence requires knowledge on your part, as well as the implementation of protocols by your employer. The following information, in addition to other training, will help prepare you to recognize and respond to an aggressive person and provide some strategies to maintain personal safety.

However, if you are not comfortable or confident in your ability to interact with an aggressive individual, or if you feel unsafe at any time, notify your shift leader, supervisor or manager.

**First Encounter Assessing Risk**
Staff can avert client aggression/violence by means of their approach to service delivery/interactions. Persons with cognitive impairment, dementia, physical illness or mental health issues may not be able to communicate their needs verbally. It is imperative that staff constantly assess the client’s needs and ensure the service they provide is client-centred.

All clients should be treated with dignity and respect, and should not be stereotyped as perpetrators of violent acts. If we strive to meet their needs and communicate appropriately, we can avert episodes of aggressive behaviours.

**Client Assessment**
Determine whether the client displays the following:
- Negative mood/attitude
- Signs of substance abuse
- Disorientation

**TIPS**
- Observe body language: does client appear to be aggressive? (e.g., pacing, clenched fists, swearing, agitated expression, throwing/kicking items).
- Before meeting with a client, review client’s history: does the client history include the likelihood of them exhibiting aggressive or violent behaviour?
- Update client case plans to indicate additional factors that trigger aggression and/or violence.
- Are staff who are more experienced or who have a demonstrated ability to handle potentially violent situations assigned to high risk areas or high risk clients?
- If you feel threatened in any way during client service delivery, request the presence of another staff member.
- If clients become hostile during an interaction, stop the interaction immediately.

Before engaging with a client you think may be escalating, mentally prepare yourself for the worst case scenario, assess risk, and plan your exit strategy. If you are with a partner discuss intervention techniques, who will take the lead, what signals you will use with each other to communicate that it’s time to disengage and leave.
Observe body language: does client appear to be aggressive? (e.g., pacing, clenched fists, swearing, agitated expression, throwing/kicking items).

Look for clues that may indicate substance use. Empty bottles of alcohol, needles, pipes, etc. Signs of intoxication can include slurred speech, odour, unsteadiness and yelling.

Scan location of client(s). Are there any safety concerns around entering the area (e.g., fire, wire, gas, glass, drugs, thugs) or environmental hazards such as excessive traffic, steep pathways, fencing, etc.?

Clients who are substance users have the potential to become aggressive and/or violent. Get to know your clients. Observe clients who are regular substance users and note when they seem to be more lucid to determine the best time to engage with them. It is also helpful to ask the client when a good time would be for them.

If you observe clients engaging in drug use at a shelter, direct them to stop (if you feel comfortable doing this) and report the incident to your shift leader, supervisor or manager immediately. If you observe clients engaging in drug use in public or in their homes, casually remove yourself from any drug activity, letting the client know you will return at another time and inform your shift leader, supervisor or manager.

Recognizing an Angry / Aggressive Individual
Aggression includes a range of behaviours, which can start with a mood change, progress to an increase in volume of voice, angry speech, and escalate to physical aggression with hitting and kicking.

It is important to remember that an individual can move from one behaviour to another very rapidly. Use caution if someone exhibits one or more of the following non-verbal signs or body language:

> Red-faced or white-faced
> Sweating
> Pacing, restless or repetitive movements
> Trembling or shaking; clenched jaws or fists
> Facial grimacing
> Exaggerated or violent gestures
> Change in voice, loud talking or chanting
> Shallow, rapid breathing
> Scowling, sneering or use of abusive language
> Glaring or avoiding eye contact

When encountering a client who has become agitated or aggressive, make sure there is ample space between you and the client, and that you are able to leave the area swiftly and safely if needed.

De-escalation and Dealing with Aggressive Individuals
Begin any intervention by asking the individual to describe their view of the problem that is triggering the behaviours observed. This allows for the identification of the source of anxiety or agitation and provides clues as to how to proceed.

If the source of the problem can be identified, acknowledge and validate the individual’s feelings. Some possible reasons for an individual’s anxiety or anger could be:

> Substance use (if the individual is intoxicated, do not begin to intervene)
> Conflict with family, peers or staff
> Response to internal stimuli (i.e., auditory or visual hallucinations)
> Response to external stimuli (i.e., the noise/light and lack of personal/private space in communal settings)

Verbal Communication
Focus your attention on the other person to let them know you are interested in what they have to say.

Remain calm and try to calm the other person. Do not allow the other person's anger to become your anger.
Use a soft tone of voice; speak slowly, clearly and concisely. The soft tone will assist the de-escalation as the individual will stop to hear and will begin to mirror your tone.

Speak simply. Do not rely on official language, workplace jargon or complex terminology.

Avoid communicating a lot of technical or complicated information when emotions are high.

Effective listening is a simple intervention and can be enhanced by open-ended questions. For example, “Can you tell me a bit more about that?” “What else has happened in your day?” Clarify what the individual tells you by reviewing the facts. Never assume or be judgmental.

Encourage the person to talk. Do not tell the person to relax or calm down.

Validate the feelings expressed (e.g., indicate that you can see they are upset), but work with the behaviours.

Use delaying tactics to give the person time to calm down (e.g., offer a drink of water in a disposable cup).

State options that allow the individual to make choices whenever possible. People often become aggressive and violent because they see themselves as powerless. If the individual is ambivalent and unable to make a decision, you can intervene (e.g., “It seems difficult for you to choose right now. Would it be alright if I make a decision for you this time?”).

Be honest. Do not make deals or promises you cannot keep.

Avoid the WHY question. This question communicates to the individual that he/she has done something wrong or has behaved badly.

Do not confront, antagonize, criticize, challenge, threaten or belittle.

Posture and Body Language

Your posture must match your conversation. Individuals will be aware of discrepancies.

Mirror the individual’s posture by standing when he/she stands or sitting (or kneeling) when he/she sits.

Regardless of the position or posture, make sure you are able to quickly retreat or flee if needed.

Any movement, especially a sudden movement, toward an individual may be interpreted as threatening.

Use calm body language

Maintain a relaxed posture with hands unclenched, and an attentive expression. Make sure your hands are visible (i.e., not in your pockets, or behind you) – clients who have experienced violence may think you are reaching for a weapon.

Position yourself at a right angle, rather than directly in front of the other person.

Avoid crossing your arms or placing your hands on hips. These can be interpreted as aggressive stances. Look for an open, comfortable stance. A slouching posture can give an impression of ease.

Avoid prolonged eye contact by lowering your eyes to the individual’s chin level. Direct eye contact has many different cultural interpretations.

Terminating an Interaction with an Angry Client

You should not continue with intervention strategies when behaviour has escalated to physical aggression. Your goal at this time is to remove yourself and bystanders from the area (e.g., other clients) as soon as possible. If you are concerned that client may be violent towards others (especially children), the police should be called.

In the community, use your professional judgement and current situation/circumstance in which to make some progress in de-escalating the client. If you aren’t successful in that timeframe, remove yourself from the situation. If progress (de-escalation) is evident, continue with the intervention. In a shelter setting with staff available for support, continue the intervention until it is evident no progress will be made.

**TIPS**

- Calmly and politely interrupt the conversation and let the client know that depending on the situation you will be leaving or ask them politely to leave.
- Notify your supervisor.
- If you are positioned near a door, exit while continuing to talk and face the client.
- If you are not able to get to a safe place or exit the area, call 911.
- Do not return to the meeting if you believe the person poses a physical threat.
Dealing with Physical Attacks
If you are alone or in public and are faced with a client who has made a threat of violence against you, or tries to physically assault you:

TIPS
✓ Call a code on the radio or mobile device (if you use radios or mobile devices at your location).
  Make sure you note your location and whether weapons or other hazards are present.
✓ Yell or scream as loud as possible. Shout words like STOP! HELP! FIRE! Blow a whistle, activate a personal alarm or activate a fire alarm or any other device that would create a scene. Run to a nearby store or the nearest well-lit area and continue calling for help.
✓ If you are being pulled or dragged along, do everything you can to break free and run to a safe place.
  If this is not possible, fall to the ground and use your weight to resist being dragged. Use your legs to kick and protect yourself.
✓ If you are in a public area, give bystanders specific instructions to help you.
  Single someone out and send them for help, e.g., “You in the yellow shirt call the police!”
✓ If you are assaulted, call 911 as soon as it is safe to do so.
✓ Report the incident to your supervisor as soon as possible.
✓ Write down your recollection of the incident as soon as possible to assist the police or hospital with details.
✓ After a traumatic incident, seek support and/or counselling (through the internal debriefing process or the employee and family assistance program).
✓ Never try to disarm an armed individual.
  If possible, try to leave the location and call 911.

Dealing with Weapons
NEVER accept a weapon from an upset, agitated individual; the person may change their mind and turn the weapon on you. Ask them to set it down on the floor or counter, from a safe distance (e.g., 10 feet).
When a situation or potential for violence escalates, recognize that common items might be used as weapons.

Dealing with Threatening / Harassing Phone Calls
Employees who receive a threatening phone call must notify a manager so that an Incident Report can be completed. If the phone call is from a known client or ex-client, discuss appropriate strategies with your manager to stop further calls. Report threatening or harassing calls to your shift leader, supervisor, manager.

NEVER give out your home phone number and NEVER call clients from your home. If calling from a cell phone, the call block feature (*67) may not be available.

TIPS
✓ If a client is abusive, interrupt the conversation firmly, but politely and explain that their language is not acceptable and that you will terminate the call unless they refrain from such behaviour.
✓ Be firm and consistent.
✓ Hang up if necessary.
✓ Notify your supervisor or manager.
✓ If the caller calls back, interrupt the conversation firmly, but politely and advise the caller that you will transfer the call to your supervisor or manager.
✓ Try to avoid taking the situation personally.
✓ Take notes on everything said (e.g., exact wording of abuse or threat if possible, any accent or speech impediment, manner of speaking, and observations about background noise).
Reporting
You should review section 3.2.a of the division’s Workplace Violence Policy on incident reporting. It is the employee’s responsibility to report the incident to his/her manager promptly. All personal safety incidents involving clients must be carefully documented in the client’s file. If a criminal act is involved, the police must be notified.

Some incidents may not be preventable, but the reporting of incidents is important as reports provide management and the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHSC) with a picture of what is happening in the work place. This enables us to be proactive in the prevention of future incidents.

Completing the Incident Report
✓ Your manager must complete the Supervisor’s Report of Injury/Accident with the employee reporting the incident. The supervisor checks the box, INCIDENT/NEAR MISS, if there is no lost time, no medical attention, and no first aid. The employee completes the Worker’s Report of Injury/Disease.
✓ Your manager must send a copy of the completed form to Human Resources, Occupational Health and Safety staff.
✓ Your manager will work with you to determine appropriate action to prevent similar incidents.
✓ The employee involved in the incident must complete the Incident Report and meet with their direct supervisor. The incident must also be documented in the client’s electronic file.
✓ If you are assaulted, call 911 as soon as it is safe to do so.
✓ Report the incident to your supervisor as soon as possible.
✓ Write down your recollection of the incident as soon as possible to assist the police or hospital with details.
✓ Your supervisor will work with you to determine appropriate action to prevent similar incidents.
✓ Your manager must send a copy of the completed form to the Joint Occupational Health and Safety committee for each location.

Debriefing
You should review section 3.1.c of the division’s Workplace Violence Policy on debriefing. After a traumatic incident, seek support and/or counselling (through the internal debriefing process or the employee and family assistance program). It is important to debrief following any intervention with an aggressive individual because it allows time to process what happened (e.g., what worked and what was difficult) and also builds skill in handling other crisis situations.

When you have witnessed or have been involved in an incident, notify your manager as soon as possible. You and your manager will plan a debriefing session that provides an opportunity to talk about the experience, the action taken, and further steps to be taken to prevent a recurrence. Debriefing may be done with your manager, with a small group of your peers, or in the team, while respecting your confidentiality.

Sharing of the incident enables you to receive support from your peers while team members learn to problem-solve how to avoid/minimize future similar incidents.

Your manager will encourage you to contact the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) as necessary. This service provides professional counselling for the benefit of the employee and their family members. This confidential, short-term counselling is available to help staff deal with all kinds of work and personal problems, at no cost to employees.

4 Working With People Living Outdoors
Sometimes, a street outreach worker encounters a person living outdoors who might seem more assertive or aggressive than others. Sleeping outdoors causes high levels of stress. Many street-involved people have unmet health and mental health needs, may be sleep deprived and have had past negative experiences with social and social service workers. All of these factors were taken into consideration while compiling this chapter.

Street Outreach – Engaging Clients
Engagement Stances When Encountering a Client for the First Time
✗ Do not immediately crouch down
✓ From a few feet away, introduce yourself and offer services
✓ Gauge the client’s mood and interest
✓ If the client does not seem aggressive and you feel comfortable, crouch so you can quickly stand should the situation change
✓ Angle yourself away from the client to ensure a quick getaway if necessary.
Clients With Health Issues
When approaching individuals on the street, remember that some clients may have mental health concerns, may use substances, and/or could be living with an Acquired Brain Injury. Clients’ reactions to you can be varied and often unpredictable.

Before engaging, performing an intake, or referring a client to another provider, it is important to build a solid trusting relationship with the person. Patience and reliability help build and maintain trust.

- Be prepared to adapt your communication style to fit the client
- Always approach the client in a calm unhurried manner
- Address the client by name (if known) and introduce yourself
- Briefly and clearly explain your role and why you are talking to them
- Wear your name tag/staff ID, unless wearing it could hinder your relationship with the client
- Speak slowly and respectfully

Communication Style
People, who are under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, have a mental illness and/or a brain injury, can be overly sensitive to perceived condescension and nagging.

- Use simple/plain language
- Avoid jargon, acronyms, sarcasm, and irony
- Arrange to meet in a quiet, private, friendly and comfortable space
- The conversation should address only one or two identified issues, don’t overwhelm the client

Check-in to make sure your client fully understands what has been discussed, for example:

“Let me make sure I have everything right. I will meet you here on Wednesday at 9:30 a.m. and we will go to the ID clinic to see Jim. After we see him, we will get coffee at Tim Horton’s. Do I have that correct? Does that work for you? Okay. Let me write that down for you on a card and for me on my calendar. Thanks.”

Clients under the influence of drugs or alcohol
When engaging with a client who has disclosed that he/she uses substances

- ask when it is best to talk with them, when are they most likely to be sober and/or feel like talking
- may you approach them or should they be left alone
- explain that you are not judging them, but only want to provide the best possible service to them
- inform other workers who may encounter the client
- clients may know each other, so be vigilant about confidentiality

Encampments
Encampments are considered any location where an individual “builds” or “constructs” a shelter to stay in. More than just a sleeping bag or blankets, the individual adds a tent/lean-to/tarp and tree structure. Most times these are in the forest.

Staff must NOT enter encampments or wooded areas alone. Staff must be in pairs.

There are many potential hazards in encampments including
- the person living there may become violent
- broken glass
- uneven terrain
- sharp sticks and needles
- trip and fall risks

If the encampment poses a safety risk to the residents or public, please report this to your supervisor immediately. Always wear your Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) gear and steel-toed boots when going into encampments.

Conducting Outreach in Wooded Areas
Some homeless people build encampments in the woods. Outreach workers are expected to wear the provided protective gear, including steel-toed boots/shoes, backpacks, flashlights, Fox 40 whistles, Blackberries and bug spray.

**TIPS**

- Always keep your PPE handy
- NEVER enter a wooded area alone
- Always go with a partner; try to schedule visit during the daytime
- Always inform the shift leader before entering and upon exiting a new area or an unknown encampment
- Safety is paramount.
Each person approaches wooded areas/encampments differently. Be sure to make an exit plan during your entry, as it’s very easy to get lost.

Public lands in Toronto are used for a variety of activities. Street outreach workers entering wooded areas need to be aware that people may be nearby, and ensure they make themselves visible to others. Brightly coloured safety vests can be obtained from your supervisor.

Navigation tools to use when entering wooded areas without a trail or path
There are techniques to use when entering wooded areas. Whatever technique works best for you is the right technique. The more experienced you are with any of the techniques, the safer you will be when entering wooded areas to do outreach and connect with homeless people.

Three-object sighting
This technique can only be used when you have a clear view from the original sighting behind and in front of you. The three-object sighting helps you to travel in a straight line toward your destination and back to your starting point. The three-object sighting technique uses an object behind you, an object in front of you, and your final destination. When all three objects are aligned in a straight line you are traveling straight towards your destination. When the object in front of you appears to the left of your final destination, you are traveling off course to the right of your final destination. When the object in front of you appears to the right of your final destination, you are traveling off course to the left of your final destination.

Blazing
This technique uses markers created along your route such as: tying a string to a branch, marking a branch or branches, or any marking method that you create to indicate the way back to the start. Make sure to always point the marker towards the return direction.

Birds-eye view
This is a more involved technique and takes advanced preparation. Study a map of the area and try to picture, based on the topography, what you expect to see and from what direction. When you understand the map and the topography, you will be able to know where you are and which direction you need to go to return to your starting point.

Environmental hazards
The street outreach workers’ job can take them to unique and ever-changing environments. Bringing services to people living outdoors can present distinctive risks for the worker’s health and safety. The City of Toronto, as the employer, has a responsibility to fully inform street outreach workers of these potential risks, and outreach workers need to take these matters seriously. Workers must abide by City policies, maintain awareness of their environment, and be prepared to minimize environmental risks/hazards where possible.

**TIPS**
- Scan the area for potentially dangerous situations that could cause injury to yourself or others
- Always ask, "is this scene dangerous to enter?"
- Fire, wire, gas, glass, weapons

**Weather**

**Sun**
Outreach staff spend long periods of time outdoors, increasing the amount of sun they are exposed to. Staff are required to use the sunscreen and hats provided in the PPE package.

**TIPS**
- Take breaks in air conditioned or a shady cool environment
- Drink plenty of water and other fluids
- Re-apply sunscreen according to directions

**Cold**
Outreach workers are on high alert during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts. Staff can be exposed to temperatures below -15°C. Engaging people living outdoors in colder weather exposes staff to cold, stress and frostbite. Staff must be aware of the warning signs for cold-related illnesses, particularly frostbite. Staff receive and should use winter gear such as a coat and hat.

**TIPS**
- Dress in layers
- Take rest breaks in heated areas
- Use the mobile outreach vehicles to get warm between client visits
- Drink plenty of warm fluids

View the Red Cross chart Wind Chill Hazards and Risk of Frostbite at www.redcross.ca/cmslib/general/cma_cold_handout_en.PDF
Rain
Rain causes wet conditions that can cause dangerous driving or walking conditions. Slips and falls are common.

**TIPS**
- Wear waterproof or rainproof clothing and boots
- Bring an umbrella
- Layer clothing or bring extra dry clothing
- Wear shoes with safe slip resistant treads

Snow and ice
Snow and ice cause wet or icy conditions that can cause dangerous driving or walking conditions. Slips and falls are common.

**TIPS**
- Wear waterproof or temperature appropriate outerwear and clothing
- Wear boots and/or shoes with slip resistant treads
- Inspect the ground and/or walk-way for ice or the anticipation of black ice.

Buildings, construction sites, and bridges
- Be aware of construction and maintenance activities happening in nearby buildings
- Obey warning signs and traffic signals
- Do not enter construction sites
- Tell your supervisor before you enter and after you leave a site
- Make sure the area is well lit and use a flashlight if necessary
- Proceed with caution and give a verbal warning before approaching an encampment

Traffic
Outreach workers must be mindful of their safety while conducting outreach in areas where there is traffic.
- Remember, traffic is heavier during certain times of the day
- Avoid checking your mobile device or sending e-mails while crossing city streets

- Obey the rules of the road while traveling in an outreach vehicle, on an outreach bicycle or on foot
- Don’t jaywalk
- Be aware of moving vehicles

Heating grates
Some clients choose to sleep on heating grates to keep warm and can pose a health hazard to both the client and outreach worker. These grates release heat in the form of steam which makes the person damp. In cold temperatures, this can cause frost-bite or hypothermia. Stay back from the heating grate when engaging with clients.

Safety attire
Workers who wear backpacks should gauge how heavy the pack is. It should be packed as lightly as possible so the PPE gear does not cause any shoulder/back discomfort. In an emergency where a quick exit is required, make sure you can leave the area quickly with the backpack. Be prepared to leave it behind if necessary. Do not keep personal items or any materials that you cannot leave behind in the backpack if you need to drop it.

Proper footwear is mandatory when entering encampments. Consult your supervisor to submit the necessary paperwork to get your safety boots. Safety boots should always be kept at work and not be taken home. If you have not received all your PPE please speak to your supervisor.

Do not wear any jewellery or items around your neck.

Working together – safety in pairs
Front-line staff are responsible to tell their supervisor about any feelings of discomfort or apprehension regarding a client contact or an up-coming client visit. If you have any doubt about the level of risk associated with future client contact or a scheduled client visit, ask your supervisor to help you assess the situation and if appropriate, assign a partner to you.

During the course of the visit, if you feel uneasy or uncomfortable with a situation, remove yourself – with as much tact as possible – to a public space and report the incident immediately to your supervisor. Wait for them to give you further instruction.

When engaging clients, staff working pairs should divide the work. Ideally, one person should stand back and survey the area while the other person speaks with the client. This increases the likelihood of a quick response to any unexpected actions.
**Injured clients**

Survey the scene

- ✓ Assess hazards at the scene
- ✓ Take charge: fire, wire, gas, glass, weapons
- ✓ Make the area safe for yourself and others
- ✓ Determine the number of casualties, what happened and the cause of injury
- ✓ Identify yourself as first aid/CPR certified and obtain consent to assist the person
- ✓ Call 911
- ✓ Call your supervisor for support
- ✓ Provide comprehensive documentation

**Overnight shift**

Outreach services on overnight shifts are different from those during evening and day shifts. Visiting encampments, parks or bridges in the dark can pose additional challenges.

**TIPS**

- ✓ Park vehicle in well lit area
- ✓ Use the light located on the top of the vehicle to survey the area before getting out and walking
- ✓ To avoid startling the clients, call out and state your intentions from a distance to alert them of your arrival
- ✓ Always have a flashlight with you when doing outreach after dark
- ✓ Notify your supervisor if you are delayed with a client

**Engaging with Clients in Enclosed Spaces**

Before approaching a client, assess the area for any safety risks and plan an exit strategy. Take note of any dark areas and ensure there is a clear path to walk.

**Engaging with Clients Who Use Substances**

A key part of outreach work involves engaging and working with all people who are homeless regardless of their other issues like mental health acquired brain injury or substance use.

Users can sometimes become aggressive and/or violent. Observe clients who regularly use substances. Note when they seem to be more lucid, then determine the best time to engage with them. Even better, ask the client when is a good time to speak with them.

Casually remove yourself from any drug activity. Let the client know you will come back another time and inform your supervisor. If you feel unsafe at any time, notify your supervisor immediately.

**De-escalating**

Before engaging with a client you think may be escalating, plan your exit strategy and mentally prepare yourself for the worst case scenario. If you are with a partner, discuss intervention techniques, who will take the lead, what signals you will use to communicate with each other when it’s time to disengage and leave.

When encountering a client who has become agitated or aggressive, make sure there is ample space between you and the client, and you are able to leave the area swiftly and safely if need be.

Speak softly and calmly, keeping hands in clear view. If the client continues to escalate plan your exit.

**Terminating an Interaction with an Angry Client**

- ✓ Calmly and politely interrupt the conversation and let the client know that, depending on the situation, you will be leaving or ask them politely to leave
- ✓ Notify your supervisor
- ✓ If you are positioned near a door, exit while continuing to talk while facing the client
- ✓ If you are not able to get to a safe place or exit the area, call 911. Use the Emergency Call option on your mobile device

**Personal Threats and Attacks**

**Incidents**

The City of Toronto Investigation and Reporting of Injuries and Accidents Policy defines an incident as “an event with potential to cause injury, illness, death or property damage.”

**EXAMPLES**

- witnessing a violent act
- being threatened physically or verbally, including any situation that makes you feel uncomfortable, such as a person yelling at you
or leaving a threatening note on your car
> receiving threatening phone calls
> working in a location where there is police activity
> road rage incidents

Many incidents may not be preventable. It is important to report incidents to the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee because these reports provide the Committee with a picture of what happens in the work environment. This allows the City to be proactive in addressing workplace hazards.

**TIPS**

- Trust your instincts – always listen to your gut feelings regarding safety
- Avoid the WHY question. This implies that the client has done something wrong or behaved badly
- Victims and perpetrators of violence need four times more personal space than is required by other individuals. Keep ample space between you and the client
- When beginning an intervention, ask the individual to describe his/her view of the problem that is triggering the aggressive or violent behaviours. This helps them to identify the source of anxiety or agitation and provides clues as to how to proceed
- Do not make deals or promises you cannot keep
- Look for an open, comfortable stance. Avoid crossing your arms or placing your hands on hips. These can be interpreted as aggressive stances.

**Debriefing**

It is important to debrief following any intervention with an aggressive individual. This allows time to process what happened, what worked and what was difficult. This also builds skill in handling other crisis situations.

When an employee has witnessed or has been involved in an incident, the employee must notify his/her supervisor as soon as possible. The supervisor and the employee then plan a debriefing session that provides an opportunity to talk about the experience, the action taken, and further steps to be taken to prevent a recurrence. Debriefing may be done with the supervisor only, or in a small group of the employee’s peers, or with the team.

The supervisor encourages the staff involved to contact the Employee Assistance Program as necessary. This service provides professional counselling for the benefit of the employee and their eligible family members. This confidential, short-term counselling is available to help staff deal with all kinds of work and personal problems. There is no cost to employees.

**Resources**

**Employee Assistance Program**
To discuss an appropriate plan of response and ensure that support services are offered to victims of violence. 416-392-6633

**Human Rights Office**
Provides advice and assistance regarding issues of workplace harassment. 416-392-8383

**Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee**
Names and phone numbers of committee reps are posted on the JOHSC board in your office. See the JOHSC in your office.

**Community Crisis Support Team** 416-392-8710

**Threatening/harassing phone calls**
Employees who receive threatening phone calls must notify their supervisor so an Incident Report can be completed. If the phone call is from a known client, you need to discuss appropriate strategies with your supervisor to stop further calls.

Never give out your home phone number.

**TIPS**

- If the client is abusive, explain that their language is not acceptable and you will terminate the call if they don’t stop
- Be firm and consistent
- Hang up if necessary
- Avoid taking the situation personally
If the threatening phone call is from a known person, tell them their behaviour unacceptable and end the call.

If the threatening phone call is from an unknown person, document everything said and observe background noise, voice characteristics and any other identifying factors.

Intervention strategies

- Examine the context of the threat.
- Clients who are at risk of becoming threatening should be seen with other staff for protection and to dilute the threat.
- Address any threats immediately with the client and/or consultation with a colleague.
- Immediately document and report even minor threats.
- Recognize when external controls are needed and then take immediate action.
- Discuss and debrief after the threat has been contained with all staff involved.
- Don’t ignore threats; when they occur, take immediate action.

Physical attacks
Use the Emergency Call on your mobile device and call 911 if you are being physically attacked. Contact your supervisor when it is safe to do so.

**TIPS**

- Make a scene, yell or scream as loudly as possible; shout words like STOP! HELP! FIRE!
- Run to a nearby store or the nearest well-lit area and continue calling for help.
- If you are being pulled or dragged along, fall to the ground and use your weight to break their hold on you.
- Blow a whistle, activate a personal alarm or a fire alarm or any other device that would create a scene and draw attention.
- If you are in a public area, give bystanders specific instructions to help you. Single out an individual and send them for help, for example, “You in the yellow shirt, call the police!”
- If someone grabs your belongings, DO NOT resist. Throw the item to the ground several feet away and run in the opposite direction yelling HELP! DO NOT chase the person.

- When it is safe to do so, contact the police and your supervisor immediately after any incident.
- Never try to disarm an armed individual. If possible, leave the location and call 911.
- Never accept a weapon from an upset, agitated individual; the person may change their mind and turn the weapon on you. Ask them to set it down on the ground or counter.
- If you are assaulted, call 911 when it is safe to do so.
- Report the incident to your supervisor as soon as possible.
- As soon as possible, write down your recollection of the incident to assist the police or hospital with details.
- After a traumatic incident, seek support and/or counselling through the internal debriefing process or the Employee Assistance Program.

**Transporting clients**

- If a client’s behaviour is not conducive to safe and secure travel, DO NOT TRANSPORT THEM! Give the client a TTC token, or seek alternative and safe modes of travel to ensure the client’s needs are met, or consider rescheduling the appointment.
- When transporting a client, clearly explain the rules of the S2H vehicle before the client gets in.
- All City of Toronto vehicles are NON SMOKING.
- Staff should always be in pairs when transporting clients in a City vehicle, with their supervisors support.
- While one staff member drives, and monitors the road, the other staff member should be focused on engaging the client(s), particularly observing their mannerisms. The staff member seated in the passenger seat should turn sideways to face the client(s), engaging the client(s) in conversation, if possible. If not, be sure to observe the client regularly using car mirrors. You can build rapport with the client using time in the vehicle.
- Clients should always store their belongings in the vehicle’s trunk where possible, not with them in the backseat. Staff are advised to use their discretion on storing belongings as it could become a barrier to service.
- Staff must wear seatbelts; clients should as well.
- If you find yourself in a situation that is unsafe and/or the client
continues to escalate, pull the vehicle over in a safe spot, and get out! Call 911 and then your supervisor.

Clients and their pets in public places
Before engaging with a client’s pet, always ask the owner’s permission. Engaging with a client’s pet could be problematic, especially if the client does not want you to touch the pet(s).

You may encounter pets that are alone and tied up, unleashed, or not under the control of their owner while conducting outreach in public places.

**TIPS**
- Assess the immediate surroundings for safety hazards that would be further complicated by a pet that is not leashed or not under the control of the owner
- Never approach an animal that is tied up
- Before taking any further action, notify your supervisor immediately, expressing your discomfort or concerns
- Tell the dog owner that you would like to talk to them and ask them if they can control their pet, and keep a safe distance while attempting to engage the person in conversation
- Remove yourself from the situation if you feel it has become or is unsafe and advise your supervisor when it is safe to do so

Transportation of clients and their pets

**TTC**
TTC is the preferred method of transportation of clients and their pets. Animals are not permitted on the TTC during peak hours of Monday-Friday, 6:30-10:00 a.m. and 3:30-7:00p.m. Alternative transportation may be required or the appointment time changed accordingly.

**City vehicles**
Any animals being transported in City vehicles must be safely secured to promote the safety of the driver and all passengers. To accommodate pets, Streets to Homes has six foot leashes, a pet carrier for smaller animals and removable bars or mesh that can be placed at the rear of the vehicle for larger animals.

**TIPS**
- Ask the client if they can leash their pet (6 foot leashes are available to staff where the client agrees to leash their pet, but has no leash).
- When a client has a large unleashed animal, ask if the animal can be transported in the rear area of the vehicle, separated from the cabin area by bars or meshing.
- If a client has a cat or other small animal, ask if it can be secured in the pet carrier or if it can ride in the rear area of the vehicle.

If the client is not agreeable to any or all of the suggestions above, consult your supervisor.

**Transporting deceased pets in City vehicles**
On rare occasions, outreach staff assist a client in transporting a deceased animal. Staff are not required to move deceased animals unless they are comfortable doing so. In this situation, staff must inform their supervisor to discuss their comfort level in moving a deceased animal.

Workers who agree to move the deceased animal must
- Consult with the supervisor/shift leader to gather specific information related to the condition of the body and any presenting issues.
- Make sure there are no bodily fluids escaping from the animal. If there are fluids, DO NOT touch the animal until you have spoken with the supervisor/shift leader and any third parties who have been consulted such as public health.
- Use universal precautions when moving a dead animal by wearing latex gloves, putting down garbage bags in the trunk area, using a box or bag or other items to secure the body.
- The supervisor/shift leader must ensure that the vehicle is cleaned as soon as possible. Until cleaning complete, the trunk should remain empty.

**Managing public and community members**
Workers must be prepared to manage the public’s curiosity about what they do. There are some situations when the public may interfere with client engagement. These incidents must be handled with caution and care.

**TIPS**
- Plan outreach strategies when doing outreach in high pedestrian traffic such as parades, rallies, and other large public gatherings.
- When working, have business cards and your City ID with you at all times. Introduce yourself and if asked, inform people of who you are and your role at Streets to Homes.
- If approached by someone while engaging with a client, kindly...
inform the person they are interrupting and that your supervisor would be happy to answer any questions they may have.

Avoid getting into an argument with members of the public.

**Law enforcement**
When doing street outreach, you may encounter police officers speaking with an individual with whom you have engaged or will be engaging with shortly. Be aware that some clients distrust police and/or may have had negative experiences with police. If you are unsure of how a client may perceive your interaction with police, ask your client for permission to support them. It may be best to wait until the officer has finished speaking with your client. Then, if your client agrees, approach the officer to introduce yourself in a professional and respectful manner. Explain your role with respect to working with the client, and advocate on the client’s behalf if the officer has issued a ticket. Every situation will be different. If you are unsure how to approach a situation involving law enforcement, speak to your supervisor before taking any action.

**Special events**
When doing street outreach at or during special events such as theatre shows, rallies and parades, be mindful that you will likely be interfering with a source of income for clients who are panhandling. This can cause a relationship breakdown and could result in aggressive behaviour.

**TIPS**
- Keep up-to-date on special events going on around the City that may impact the work you are doing with clients. Try to connect with clients either before or after large events where possible and appropriate.
- When engaging a panhandler, do not block them from the public. Safely crouch beside them or ask for permission to speak with them.

**Additional notes**
Supervisors should ensure that this safety manual is reviewed annually with staff.

**5 Working in Shelter Setting**

Shelters vary from site to site, both physically and operationally. Always familiarize yourself with the layout of your work environment, especially if you are new to a particular location.

**TIPS**
- Tour the facility or location. You need to thoroughly familiarize yourselves with the building in order to quickly and accurately give your location or to respond to a code.
- Identify locations of emergency exits and where on the property they exit (i.e., where will you end up?).
- Ideally travel in pairs whenever possible (e.g., during bed checks, bathroom checks). This may not be operationally possible in every case, but do so when it is possible (e.g., a co-worker is available to accompany you).

**Client Access**
Most shelters have a single entrance for clients. For most shelters, the entrance is controlled and monitored by staff on a 24/7 basis. Where possible and practical, ensure that there is a barrier between the staff and clients that ensures staff safety in case of client aggression.

**Interview Rooms**
If your facility has an interview room for meeting clients, ensure you consider the following. If the physical conditions of the room don’t allow you to follow the tips, try to meet the intent of the tips. These tips are also applicable to enclosed rooms in general (e.g., study room in a library).
TIPS

✓ You should have direct access to an escape route (door). Two doors is ideal.
   If there is only one door, reduce barriers between you and the door (see figures 4, 5, 6).
✓ Ideally a heavy desk (i.e., can’t easily be pushed or thrown) should be between you and the client.
   If your desk is light, consider placing rubber pads under the feet of the desk to cause more friction and reduce it from sliding if someone were to push it).
✓ Chairs on casters (wheels) are easier to get out of quickly.
✓ Remove items on the desk which could be used as a weapon.
✓ Ensure other staff can monitor the room or are close by.
✓ Ensure you know how to use an emergency buzzer system, if one is available.
✓ Staff who regularly interview clients should also always carry a two way radio, in and out of the office.

Recreation Areas
Any area which is a gathering place, has the potential for an incident.

TIPS

✓ Familiarize yourself with these areas in terms of fixed entrances and exits.
✓ Before entering a room, use all your senses.
   Visually scan the room to see how many people, grouping, moved furniture, spills on the floor. Is the furniture layout fixed? Can chairs be moved or picked up easily? Are beverages allowed in the room?
   Are there blind spots in the room which cannot be seen from the entrance? Do clients have access to the light switches?
✓ Listen for any sounds of aggressive behaviour.
✓ Smell for any odours, such as alcohol, chemicals or smoke.
× Avoid addressing a client in front of others.
   Take them aside, and adopt a softer tone of voice.

Dining Areas
Depending on the client group, meal times can be a time when aggressive behaviour can occur quite often.

TIPS

✓ Familiarize yourself with any meal time procedures, to ensure your safety and the safety of coworkers. These may vary from shelter to shelter.
✓ Be aware of changing conditions and how it may affect your safety (e.g., the number of clients, the layout of the dining area, the time allotted for the meal - the less time, the more clients at a given time).
✓ Be aware of which clients have food issues and/or are at high risk for disruptive behaviour when in close proximity to other clients. For employee safety, a team intervention in any situation is the safest (as opposed to intervening on your own).

Washrooms
Washrooms are private areas for shelter clients and because they are rarely monitored, they also represent a potential health and safety risk.

TIPS

✓ When checking washrooms, make your presence known before entering (i.e., knock and announce yourself).
✓ Always after opening the door, do a scan of the area.
✓ If you suspect an inappropriate activity is taking place, call for assistance before intervening.

Client Dormitories and Rooms
Dormitories can vary greatly in size and layout. Some contain single beds and others bunk beds. If possible, there should be two entrances to a dormitory.

TIPS

✓ Know where the light switches are.
✓ To some clients, their bed area is their home, so being respectful of their space helps prevent aggressive behaviours from occurring.
✓ Rooms with a single entrance may have one to several clients. Knocking on a closed door before entering and announcing yourself can prevent client escalation due to privacy concerns.
Always when entering, stop, look and listen.
Always enter a room keeping the door open and a clear escape route.
Again, let another staff know where you are going if you are going alone.

**Bed Checks**
Most shelters do formal bed checks, once or more a night.

**TIPS**
- Depending on the size of the shelter, the staffing complement and the client make up, it is preferable that two employees do the bed check. A staff check-in procedure needs to be in place to verify that employees are safe according to either time intervals or location.
- When checking beds, avoid shining a bright light in sleeping clients’ faces, as it may result in sudden aggressive behaviour.

**Wake Ups**
Most shelters provide wake ups for clients who work or have appointments. For many clients, their experience of living on the street has taught them to react defensively if touched when asleep.

**TIPS**
- It is recommended to tap the mattress and use verbal prompts (their name usually works best). Some clients may give employees permission to touch or shake them (if this is the case, document it).
- Do not kick the bed frame or use heavy objects (e.g., flashlight) to knock the bed frame, as it may alarm the client and result in sudden and aggressive behaviour.

**Outside Congregation Areas**
Although some shelters have outside areas for clients that are enclosed for their use only, there are always areas, such as near the shelter entrance, that will have a mix of clients and non-clients.

Employees need to be aware that non-clients may be more aggressive (verbally and/or physically) toward employees.

**Special Events**
Special events such as barbecues, or events away from the shelter such as sports or picnics for clients require increased monitoring.

**6 Working in Community Setting**
As an SSHA employee, your work may require you to spend time in the community, (i.e. housing work, outreach work, street outreach, follow up work or after care). Individuals who work in the community and in clients’ homes face special risks, particularly when working alone.

You must continuously be aware of your surroundings and assess risk as a regular part of your work in the community. You should assess the geographic region, travel mode and route, time of travel, and weather conditions before setting out to engage/meet with clients in the community. Whether travelling by car or public transit, you are responsible for planning ahead.

**Remember that the most important personal safety strategy is always to attempt to avoid and/or minimize risk.**

It is your responsibility to report any feelings of discomfort or apprehension relating to client contact or an up-coming client visit to your supervisor. If there is any doubt or uncertainty around the element of risk surrounding future client contact or a scheduled client visit, ask your supervisor to assess the situation and devise some mitigation strategies (e.g., meet client in public space, assign a partner to come with you).

If, during the course of the visit, you begin to feel uneasy or uncomfortable with a situation, withdraw with as much tact as possible to a public space, report the incident immediately to your supervisor and await further instruction.

When working in pairs while engaging with clients, it is ideal for one person to stand back and survey the area while the other person speaks with the client. This will increase the likelihood of a quick response to any unexpected actions.

Employees need to be equipped with some form of communication (e.g., two way radios or cell phones). They need to know where each other is at all times in order to respond to any situation concerning employee safety.

Make sure you check in with your co-workers.
Check in with your supervisor on arrival and when leaving.
Pre-visit Assessment
Prior to any community visit, take the time to contact the client, or plan to assess the site/area at the time of the first visit. Your manager or supervisor should ensure that a process is in place to conduct a pre-visit assessment and that the information gathered is given to you so that safe approaches can be put into place. The process should clearly identify:

> Who will conduct the pre-visit assessment?
> Will the assessment be conducted in person or over the phone?
> Where will the information be documented and maintained?
> How will the information be communicated to the staff?

Use the following pre-visit assessment tool as a guide for interviewing the client.

Pre-visit Assessment Tool
Consult with client (e.g., phone interview) or other knowledgeable sources (e.g., employees familiar with client or area, client case notes, etc.) to assess for potential hazards before you visit the client in the community. Consider having your initial transition meeting in the shelter to establish rapport with the client and to determine the following:

Is there a history of violent or aggressive behaviour by the client or persons in the dwelling?
Risk mitigation tips:

✓ Arrive at safer and more public location (e.g., community centre, park, coffee shop, mall).
✓ Allow you to discuss things in private, still consider public locations (e.g., seat yourself away from others in coffee shop; find a study room in library).
✓ Consider having another worker accompany you.

Do you know of any triggers for the violent/aggressive behaviour, such as when limits are set, or during specific activities?
Risk mitigation tips:

✓ Make suggestions or ask clarifying questions to help client set the agenda or limits.
✓ Consider having another worker accompany you.

Is the violent/aggressive behaviour directed toward a particular person or generalized, toward no one in particular?
Risk mitigation tips:

✓ Consider having another worker accompany you.
✓ Meet in a public location.

✓ Conduct the interview by phone.

If directed at a particular person, what is the likelihood that this person will be in the home during a staff’s visit?
Risk mitigation tips:

✓ Arrange to visit at another time or location.
✓ Consider having another worker accompany you.
✓ Conduct the interview by phone.

Do you know of any restraining orders against anyone in the household? If yes, against whom (e.g., client, family member, friend)?
Risk mitigation tips:

✓ Find out whether they’ll be present during your visit.
✓ Consider having another worker accompany you.
✓ Meet in a public location.
✓ Conduct the interview by phone.

Have threats recently been made against the client? If so, who has made these threats?
Risk mitigation tips:

✓ Consider having another worker accompany you.

Are there pets or animals in the home or at the site?
Risk mitigation tips:

✓ Ask that pets be locked in room or put in yard, if possible.
✓ Ask that pets be put on a leash, if possible.
✓ Ask whether the pets are aggressive and what agitates them.
✓ Consider meeting outside the home, if possible.
✓ Consider having another worker accompany you.

Assessment of Area and Travel Route
Take the time to assess the geographical region that you will be entering and the travel route you will be taking, to identify the safest route to reach the client’s premises. Check with the local police to determine the crime rate for the geographical location (see Appendix for links to resources).

The supervisor should meet with you to review the client’s case and history before you visit them in their homes, or in the community.
Safety Strategies
SSHA staff provides services to businesses, individuals, families and groups in the community. Staff are vulnerable when they work alone in the community, particularly after hours. The clients’ homes may be houses, in apartment buildings, shelters, hostels.

Staff may deliver community presentations to groups or work in a school or other community facilities. Preparation is one of the most important components of your safety plan when working in the community. The following personal safety strategies have been identified to assist staff when working in the community:

Check-in Procedures
✓ Identify a designated contact at the office and a back-up.

Establish a sign-in/out log or process.
✓ Let your supervisor know where and when you are travelling, how you are travelling (e.g., car, bus, walking), estimated travel time, what route you will be taking, and when you expect to conclude your visit. This information can be noted in a travel log that is kept by your supervisor or at your shelter.
✓ If meeting with volatile clients, develop a mini safety plan with your supervisor ahead of time (i.e., check ins every half hour).
✓ Clearly define with your supervisor or manager, how often and under what circumstances you will check-in.
✓ Keep your designated contact informed of your location and consistently adhere to your call-in schedule.
✓ Let the client know that others know your schedule and where you are, in a subtle, non-threatening way (e.g., “I’m sorry if my phone rings, but my manager will be calling me regularly throughout our visit”).
✓ Call and check-in when you first arrive and as you leave, especially the first time you go to a new setting.
✓ Have your designated contact call you periodically to ensure you are okay, especially if you are concerned about a particular situation. Always respond promptly to your supervisor/shift leader when they call or email you.
✓ Identify what predetermined action or code word will be used to confirm that you require assistance.
✓ If you become concerned about a specific situation, call your designated “partner” or an office contact to ask when they expect to join you at the client’s location.
✓ Develop procedures to be followed if you do not check in as planned.

Travelling By Car
Employees who use City fleet vehicles must have a City Operator’s Permit. You are responsible for ensuring that your car is road-ready by servicing it regularly. It is important to ensure that the vehicle you are using is in good mechanical condition.

TIPS
✓ Keep the gas tank at least half (1/2) full at all times, and the vehicle’s tires properly inflated.
✓ Check windshield wiper-fluid level, battery and lights.
✓ Keep a “survival kit” in the car. The kit should include a candle, matches, blanket, hat and mitts, flash light, ice scraper and brush, flare, booster cables, road map, and water.
✓ Never hide a spare key in the vehicle; thieves know where all the hiding spots are.

Entering / Leaving Vehicle
Your personal safety begins before you even start your vehicle. Do a walk-around inspection of your vehicle each time you use it, looking for damage and obstructions around the vehicle. Also, check underneath the vehicle and inside the back seat before entering. If you notice someone near, at, or in your car, go to a safe area and contact security or the police.

Once inside the vehicle lock all doors and keep all windows up. You can roll windows down when you begin travelling and make sure all windows are up prior to stopping your vehicle.

TIPS
✓ Always approach the vehicle with the keys already in hand (see figures 7, 8). Hold the key between your thumb and first finger to protect yourself if needed. Having the keys in your hand also allows you to enter the vehicle quickly.
✓ When you arrive at your car, if you suspect a break-in, (window broken), leave immediately and call the police.
✓ When leaving your car, roll up the windows and lock all doors.
✓ Some situations may require staff to escort other staff to their cars. Determine the safest route for returning to your vehicle. Be observant! Look and listen.
Do not leave personal belongings or City issued equipment visible as these may be a target. Leave purses at home and carry identification and money in a front pocket or in a pouch that is strapped around the waist.

Safe Driving Practices
Make sure someone knows your plans, your route and your estimated arrival time. Review additional City resources on “Defensive Driving Tips” and “Safe Winter Driving Tips”.

TIPS
- Identify the safest route to your destination (e.g., avoid dangerous areas).
- If you become lost, go to the nearest service station or store to obtain directions.
- Do not stop on the side of the road.
- Be aware of daily weather/road conditions.
- When the weather and/or road conditions are poor, review the situation with your supervisor and decide whether the appointment should be rescheduled.
- If you have car trouble, raise the hood, get back in your car and lock it.
- Use your cell phone to call a towing service or emergency roadside assistance as well as notifying your supervisor. Place the “HELP Call Police” sign in the window of your vehicle. If someone offers assistance, remain in the car and ask that person to go call for help.
- If you suspect you are being followed, note the licence plate number of the other car, drive immediately to a police, fire or service station. Do not leave the car, but honk your horn repeatedly until someone responds. Do not go home.

Parking
When parking, think ahead and with security in mind. Do street lamps provide enough light for walking from the parked car to the entrance, and is there light in the entrance to the building? Has the closest and safest parking spot been located?

TIPS
- On entering a parking lot scan the whole area before parking your car. Park in a well lit area at night, and as close to the entrance as possible. Before closing your car door do another scan of the area.
- Choose a parking space that is in the open, well-lit and that offers the safest walking route to the client’s home, or facility.
- If the parking lot has video surveillance, scan the lot before going to it.
- Parking the car under a street light if arriving in the late afternoon or at night. Avoid night visits if possible.
- Park on the street, rather than on a driveway. This avoids the danger of being blocked in when you are leaving. Be aware of dead end streets.
- Park in the direction you want to go when leaving the site.
- If storing items in your car, store them in the trunk out of sight before leaving for your destination, in order to prevent others seeing you placing the items there.
- Check the trunk to ensure that it’s locked.
- Avoid underground parking whenever possible. If you must use one, park near an exit in a well-lit area. Back into the parking spot and take a few minutes to observe the surroundings before exiting the car.
- Do not park beside a van or other large vehicle where you could be wedged in.
- Do not park in a tenant’s spot.
- Do not walk to your vehicle alone, after dark or in a high risk area. Walk to and from your car with another person or a security officer. If you must walk to your vehicle alone, have a co-worker watch you from a distance.

Do not open your car window more than one inch to speak to someone approaching your car.
Do not identify your keys with your car plate, number, name or address.
Do not use the cell phone when driving.
Pull off the road to make a call and limit phone use to emergencies.
a window. Wave to them on the way to your vehicle. If no one is available, fake it and pretend you are being watched and wave to an imaginary co-worker.

Taking Public Transit (e.g., TTC)

Many employees take public transit to and from their workplaces. Familiarize yourself with safety features and services that are offered by your transit operator or on your route, bus/streetcar, and subway/train (see Appendix for links to resources).

TIPS

- When taking the bus/streetcar, sit near the driver and voice any concerns for your safety. If someone is bothering you, or if you feel threatened, let the driver know immediately.
- Ask to be let off at an undesigned stop if needed. Leave the bus from the front doors. The rear doors will remain closed so that no one can follow you off the bus.
- While waiting for the subway, stay in the area marked as the Designated Waiting Area (DWA). DWAs, are located on all subway and rapid transit (RT) platforms for your safety and convenience. A DWA has brighter lights as well as an intercom, closed-circuit camera, a public telephone, and a bench to sit while you wait. By getting on board from the DWA, you can continue your trip on a subway / RT car that has a TTC employee onboard.
- Stand back against the wall until it is time to board the subway.
- Locate the Passenger Assistance Alarms (PAAs) – the black and yellow strips located above the windows and at the ends of subway/RT cars. Press the alarm strip immediately if you see or experience an incident that should be reported or stopped. Please note that the subway alarm strips are silent, TTC personnel have been notified to contact police once you push the strip.
- Always be aware of your surroundings and wait at a designated transit stop. Be alert for people watching or following you. Stand with a group of people rather than alone. Avoid isolated or poorly lit bus stops.

Alternate Modes of Transportation

If you plan to use another mode of transportation for work related purposes, other than TTC, car, or walking (e.g., bicycle, moped, etc.), discuss the appropriateness of this alternate method of transportation with your supervisor ahead of time.

Working in Client’s Home

- Pause at the door before knocking and listen. If you hear loud, quarrelling sounds of fighting or some other disturbance, leave immediately and reschedule the visit. Inform your manager of the outcome of the visit.
- Stand near the hinge side of the door when a client opens the door. By standing near the hinge side of the door (figure 10) you maximize the potential view of the room before you enter it.

Figure 9: Bad Position

Figure 10: Good Position
Waive or reschedule a home visit in the following circumstances, and leave immediately if: the client is inappropriately dressed and refuses to dress appropriately; the client becomes hostile, threatening or abusive.

Consult your manager if a visit needs to be waived or rescheduled. Update the file with documentation of the circumstances and note safety concerns.

Continually assess the client’s behaviour, as well as the environment. If you feel uncomfortable (intuitive feeling), or if your safety is at risk, terminate the visit.

Be respectful of the client’s home and property. Ask permission before touching any of the client’s belongings.

Seat yourself near an exit and do not turn your back on the client. Never sit on a client’s bed.

Pre-program emergency contact numbers. Sit if the client sits; continue standing if the client stands.

Are there any physical hazards (barriers, broken steps, free roaming dogs, weapons) and if so, is there a plan for controlling these hazards during the visit? Request that the entry area light be on, if there is one.

If there is a possibility of encountering hazards during your visit, have you arranged for a pre-visit and post visit call to a supervisor or staff?

Will other people be in the residence during the visit? If so, do you know how many, what their relationship to the client is, whether there is any potential for violence, and who will open the door?

Do you know where the nearest telephone is? Are there emergency phones in the building, housing or parking complex? Have a cell phone with you.

Make sure your phone is easily accessible and pre-program emergency contact numbers (including 911) into your phone. However, do not program personal phone numbers into your work phone.

Do not give clients your home/personal phone numbers. Leave your office number for the client.

Working or Meeting in a Community Facility

Community facilities may or may not have the safety features provided in a City-owned facility. Be aware of the greater unpredictability in these environments. Think about and employ strategies that can maximize your personal safety in the community.

Plan specifically where you are going, where to park, which door to use, who will be there and ask about potential risks in the neighbourhood.

Arrange for a facility staff to be present and to meet you at the door, if after hours.

Find out where security/maintenance is located and how they can be reached if you need them (house phone, cell phone).

Inform security/maintenance of your arrival, what rooms you will be using, including washrooms, what equipment you require, and when you will be finished.

Ask the contact person at the community site if there is anything you should be informed about the setting, even if you are familiar with this location. An example of this information is doors that lock automatically so you don’t find yourself locked in or out.

Request support and assistance at the end of your session in putting away equipment, tidying up and carrying items. Ask about the availability of a trolley and use that if necessary.

Ask to be accompanied to the car. If another staff is not available to help and accompany you, leave with the group, if after hours.

Refer to the Universal Safety Considerations & Resources section of this guide for strategies on travelling, parking, and maintaining communication.

Do not bring personal valuables with you or assume they will be safe in a group setting.

Environmental Hazards

Animals

Ask the client if an animal lives in the home when scheduling the visit. If the answer is yes, request that the animal be kept in a separate room during the visit. You are a stranger; even normally calm animals can become protective during a visit by a stranger.

When you arrive, ask the owner to keep the animal in a separate room or on a leash. If your request is refused, you may want to reschedule the location for the visit.

If a dog or cat bites you resulting in a wound, wash the wound carefully with soap and water and seek medical attention. Report this incident to your manager for completion of an Incident Report, and to the Healthy Environments program for follow-up, and vaccination, if needed.

Animal cruelty falls into one of two categories: neglect or intentional cruelty.
Examples of these categories of abusive treatment can be found on the Ontario SPCA website at: http://www.ontariospca.ca/1-whatis.shtml
In situations where you suspect that a client may be abusing their pet or another animal, you should inform your supervisor and provide supporting documentation including specific dates and timelines.

- Do not enter a building, apartment or home where an animal may be threatening your safety.
- Do not approach strange/stray/tied-up animals. When confronted with an unfamiliar dog or cat, stand still – do not run. Avoid touching the animal or offering an outstretched palm. Do not stare the dog in the eye - look down or to the side.

6 Working Alone or Outside of Business Hours

Some staff are required to work outside of core business hours (e.g., 9AM – 5PM) or work alone (e.g., any time in the shift where assistance is not readily available from a co-worker or expected from a member of the public when needed in the normal course of duties or in the event of an injury, illness or emergency). It is important that you can communicate with your supervisor when necessary.

Ongoing communication between supervisors and staff is essential in protecting personal safety. You are responsible for ensuring that your cell phones are charged and in working order. You are required to discuss personal safety concerns with your supervisor and decide together whether their involvement is appropriate and what safety precautions are needed.

At anytime, if you are concerned about your personal safety or are unsure of the safety of a situation:

- Remove yourself from the situation.
- Call the police if necessary.
- Notify your supervisor as soon as possible.

Familiarize yourself with safety consideration and strategies that are outlined in relevant City resources (see Appendix for link to resources).

TIPS

- Use established check-in procedures.
  Ensure your Supervisor or Manager knows you are working alone. If you are working outside of business hours or alone in the community, provide the address(es) you will be attending and expected duration of work to your Supervisor.
- If you are concerned about working alone, discuss it with your Supervisor or Manager.
- Before dark, move your car to a well-lit area, close to the building or parking lot attendant.
- Call police or security if you suspect someone is lurking outside.
- Plan ahead which safe places you can retreat to and call for help.
- Do not open back door or secondary doors unless absolutely necessary.
- Do not leave back door or secondary doors unlocked, open or unattended.
- Do not empty garbage at night, especially if the dumpster is an secluded or isolated area (e.g., back of building)
- Do not mention you are alone.
- Develop methods of suggesting you are not alone (e.g., use works like “we” or “my partner and I”).

References

Personal Safety Handbook: Toronto Public Health

Personal Safety Handbook: Toronto Employment and Social Services


Assessing Violence in the Community: A handbook for the workplace Ontario Safety Association for Community Healthcare www.osach.ca
Appendix

Internet
Hyperlinks to Transit Safety Resources:

TTC Safety Tips:  
http://www3.ttc.ca/Riding_the_TTC/Safety_and_Security/Safety_tips.jsp

TTC Security Features:  
http://www3.ttc.ca/Riding_the_TTC/Safety_and_Security/Security_features.jsp

GO Transit Safety & Security:

Mississauga Transit Safety:
http://www.mississauga.ca/portal/miway/passengersafety

Durham Region Transit Safety Tips:  
http://www.durhamregiontransit.com/durham/index_e.aspx?DetailID=43

Hyperlinks to Toronto Police Services Resources:
Toronto Police Station Locations:
http://www.torontopolice.on.ca/uniform.php

Toronto Police Service Crime Statistics:
http://www.torontopolice.on.ca/statistics/stats.php

Intranet
Hyperlinks to the City’s Working Alone Resources:

Working Alone Safely Policy:  http://www.tinyurl.com/3h2x74s

Working Alone Safely Guidelines:  http://www.tinyurl.com/3d9rgoy

Working Alone Safely Risk Factor Checklist:  http://www.tinyurl.com/3efvl54
