

 <b>VERMONT</b> DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES <b>Family Services Policy Manual</b>		<h1>251</h1>
Chapter:	Staff Safety, Well-Being, and Resiliency	
Subject:	Staff Safety in Homes and the Community	Page 1 of 7
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## Purpose

To define the roles and responsibilities of staff, supervisors, district directors or managers, CIES, and central office when planning for staff safety when staff are conducting home visits and other work in the community.

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## Related Policies

- Family Services [Policy 52](#): Child Safety Interventions – Investigations and Assessments
- Family Services [Policy 61](#): Responding to Domestic Violence in Child Safety Interventions
- Family Services [Policy 82](#): Juvenile Court Proceedings – CHINS
- Family Services [Policy 99](#): Confidential Placements
- Family Services [Policy 140](#): Standby and Call-In
- Family Services [Policy 150](#): Transportation of Children and Youth in DCF Custody
- Family Services [Policy 159](#): Foster and Kinship Parent Safety
- Family Services [Policy 250](#): Reporting and Responding to Staff Safety Threats
- Family Services [Policy 252](#): Staff Safety During Removals
- Family Services [Policy 255](#): HOPE (Helping Our Peers Excel) Team

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### Additional Resources:

- [Family Services Staff Safety SharePoint Page](#)
- [Planning Checklist for Home and Community Visits](#)
- [Safety Checklist for Home and Community Visits](#)
- [Resource Family Safety Awareness Checklist](#)

## Introduction

The work of the Family Services Division comes with inherent risks. The division’s work with families may cause stress to clients, and some clients may react to our intervention with feelings of anger or hostility, violence, or threats of violence towards staff. Such reactions create risks to the personal safety of staff. Hostility is most often directed towards the division itself, and the resultant safety concerns are applicable to any employee, community partner, or foster/kinship family acting on its behalf. The safety of Family Services Division staff when visiting homes or working in the community, is a vital issue that must remain at the forefront at all times. The importance of staff safety should be given primary attention in the performance of work duties. This policy guides staff in how to:

- Plan for their personal safety when conducting work in homes and communities;
  - Assess potential risk;
  - Outline when There is a need for teamed response;
  - Outline the responsibilities of CIES after hours; and
  - Outline what is required for documentation when there is a case related concern for staff safety.

## Policy

### Personal Safety When Conducting Home or Community Visits

Family Services Division employees should take personal safety precautions when conducting work in homes and communities, particularly:

- After hours;
- In volatile situations or cases involving domestic violence (DV)/intimate partner violence (IPV);
- In isolated or rural areas, particularly those where there is not reliable cell phone service;
- In known high risk areas (prevalence of crime, gang activity, or drug use/trafficking);
- When interviewing individuals with a history of violence and significant criminal history; and

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- When interviewing individuals who may be under the influence of undue stress, mental illness, drugs, or alcohol.

Examples of safety precautions include:

- Anticipatory case consultations with the staff safety team;
- Utilizing the [Planning Checklist for Home and Community Visits](#);
- Prior to visiting the home, contacting law enforcement and/or DOC about any recent responses or involvement with the family;
- Becoming familiar with high-risk areas served by the local district office, and taking precautions when responding to child safety interventions or home visits in those locations;
- Assessing the presenting allegations, safety and risk concerns, client personalities, and family dynamics while being sensitive to personal risk factors;
- Consulting with the domestic violence specialist;
- Consulting with or seeking direct assistance or accompaniment from local police authorities when necessary;
- Routinely utilizing SafeSignal technology, which can be used with or without cell service for emergency notification;
- Conducting a teamed response with another family services worker or others;
- Ensuring your supervisor and colleagues are aware of your day’s schedule, planned home or community visits, and an expected time of return to the office;
- Being cautious when entering the local district office alone after business hours;
- Operating a safe vehicle in working order with enough gasoline to get to and from the destination;
- Driving around the area of the residence looking for unsafe conditions (poor lighting, unsecured animals, people drinking or using substances);
- Parking where you can see the car while inside the home and parking in the direction you want to leave;
- Locking all doors while in the car and when leaving the car;
- Being alert for danger when entering buildings, hallways, and private residences;
- Making note of entrances and exits in the home;
- Holding your keys while walking to the vehicle;
- Wearing shoes and clothing that make it easy to move quickly; and
- Using the official Vermont DCF photo identification badge to confirm identity when introducing self to clients.

District directors are responsible for ensuring there is a designated contact person informed about employees’ whereabouts throughout the workday and to have that contact person follow-up if an employee does not report in as expected. If an employee’s work continues after hours, the district director or designee is responsible for notifying

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CIES supervisory staff about that employee’s whereabouts, contact information, expected time of work completion and any other pertinent details. CIES is then responsible for follow-up with the employee after hours.

Safety risks should be assessed, whether formally or informally, prior to each home or community visit. The commencement of child safety interventions and unannounced home visits may increase safety risks for family services workers. Caution and planning are essential for such visits and teamed responses should be utilized when possible. Huddles are an excellent strategy to conduct planning, and the staff safety team is available for consultation upon request.

**Anticipatory Consultation to Plan for Staff Safety**

Anticipatory consultation with the staff safety team is available to any employee to plan for work or client interactions when there are circumstances that indicate there may be a particular staff safety concern. The division recognizes that staff safety planning enhances child safety and well-being as it allows for FSD staff to mindfully organize their approach, maintain holistic situational awareness, and reduce trepidation.

To request an anticipatory consult, division staff will complete the [Staff Safety Consultation Request Form](#), which prompts for preferred dates/times, other consultants who should be included, and other specifics about the situation. The form is automatically sent to the staff safety team.

**After Hours Responses from CIES**

While the division has after hours coverage in place, the support and information available is not the same as during regular business hours. After-hours responses can require a different level of safety planning.

In any situation that requires a response after hours and the response requires contact with an individual who may pose danger, the first point of contact will be to law enforcement for the purpose of either joint investigation or assistance. CIES will be the one to communicate and coordinate with law enforcement. CIES has the ability to communicate with the Director of Operations or designee as needed after hours. The division will be more cautious after hours and assume potential for additional risk if information about the family or situation is unknown. In these situations, workers will only be called out after hours if law enforcement accompanies them.

In situations regarding youth transports or situations where a child or youth require contact with family services workers after hours (e.g., accompanying or supervising a child at a hospital or police station), CIES will gather as much information about the

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child as possible and share this information with the worker. If limited information is known about a youth entering care because of their own behavior or delinquent acts, possible risks and the safety of staff will be considered when deciding how the youth will be transported. CIES will collaborate with the family services worker to determine if a teamed response is needed and call-in another worker if warranted. If a family services worker feels they need a teamed response, CIES will collaborate with them to make it possible.

**Teamed Response for Home Visits or Community Work**

Situations may arise that necessitate a response of two or more persons for home visits or work done in the community. For the purposes of this policy, this type of response is referred to as a “teamed response” (also sometimes referred to as “the buddy system”). Teams may be comprised of two or more family services workers, or the role may be filled by a:

- supervisor;
- district director;
- resource coordinator;
- human services case aide;
- central office staff;
- contracted co-located partner;
- community partner;
- service provider;
- substance abuse screener;
- domestic violence specialist;
- DOC staff;
- law enforcement;
- guardian ad litem (GAL); or
- someone within the family’s team or safety/support network.

The family services worker and supervisor will determine other individuals who may serve in this role based on the case and specific circumstances.

Use of a teamed response should be discussed with and/or assigned by a supervisor. Supervisors shall determine the need for a teamed response based on consideration of the employee’s safety. If the supervisor and worker are in disagreement regarding the need for a teamed response, consultation with the district director or designee should occur. Absent compelling reason to do otherwise, deference should be given to the expressed safety concerns of the requesting worker.

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Supervisors are required to approve and/or assign the use of a teamed response in the following circumstances:

- (1) Absent information about resolution, a teamed response is required in any case where records indicate the client or other household members have a history involving: (a) assaults or threats of violence directed at FSD staff or other professionals; or (b) a conviction involving the use of a weapon in the commission of a crime. In these situations, staff should consider requesting law enforcement assistance. The division recognizes that not all threats come with the same risk in perpetuity. If the division has information about the resolution of a previous concern, the need for a teamed response should be assessed.
- (2) A teamed response is required in all active cases that involve ongoing domestic violence, where the alleged perpetrator resides in or frequents the home. For additional safety precautions, staff should seek consultation from the domestic violence team.
- (3) A teamed response is required in all initial responses to allegations of abuse in unknown (no prior child protection history) cases if requested by the assigned family services worker.
- (4) A teamed response is required in all responses to known high crime and drug use/trafficking locations.
- (5) Previously threatened or assaulted family services workers will utilize a teamed response until such time as the worker and their supervisor jointly decide that a teamed response is no longer routinely needed.

### **Teamed Response in Other Circumstances**

In instances where a teamed response is not required by this policy, supervisors may determine that it is necessary based on consideration of all circumstances surrounding a case or work environment. Broad consideration should be given to the safety of all staff, communities, families, and children and youth. If a supervisor determines that a teamed response is necessary, employees are not permitted to decline.

Examples of other circumstances where a teamed response may be appropriate include, but are not limited to, the following:

- (1) A teamed response may be used when transporting a child not previously known to the division, when information is limited, or there are indicators of an acuteness of need or consequent unpredictability.
- (2) A teamed response may be used when the family services worker is transporting a child or doing a home/community visit with clients or household members with known emotional or behavioral challenges (e.g., a history of sexually harmful behaviors, physical aggression, making false accusations, or running away).



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- (3) A teamed response may be necessary when transporting a group of children, depending on the ages and developmental levels of the children, to adequately supervise the children while driving to the destination.
- (4) A teamed response may be necessary when a child or youth first enters DCF custody when making an initial out-of-home placement or during a placement change the youth is ambivalent about or in disagreement.