

Defusing Hostile Situations

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Department of Health & Social Services

Division of Public Assistance

FIELD SERVICES

MANAGEMENT ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES

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For Rebecca Eames, Chief of Field Services

PURPOSE

To establish written guidelines for handling client/visitor disturbances.

BACKGROUND

The services provided by Division of Public Assistance personnel involve extensive public contact. These contacts may be in person, by telephone, or in writing. This MAP deals with those incidents that involve disturbances and/or abusive conduct.

PROCEDURE

Due to the nature of services provided by the Division of Public Assistance it is expected employees will encounter people experiencing desperate situations. In a normal workday we deal with individuals and families who need emergency medical care, food, and a place to live. Individuals with physical and/or mental health problems, clients who may suffer from chemical dependency, or who have lost a loved one require special consideration.

As Division employees we need to demonstrate tolerance, understanding, respect and a caring attitude. The best way to prevent hostile situations is to be viewed by those we serve as an agency whose mission is to provide help, as opposed to being a bureaucracy.

Clerical staff have first contact with the public and the initial opportunity to make a good impression and gauge client attitudes and/or conditions.

Employees are responsible for identifying irate individuals and notifying an appropriate supervisor or designee.

I. Defusing Hostile Situations in the Office

- A. Obviously intoxicated individuals who are disruptive or incapable of conducting business, may be rescheduled for services and asked to leave the office.
- B. Verbally abusive or hostile individuals will be given one warning and opportunity to stop. If this doesn't correct the problem a supervisor or designee will be contacted for further action.

C. DOs for dealing with verbally abusive individuals:

1. DO use a calm, controlled, and evenly-toned voice.

IF YOU RAISE YOUR VOICE OR BECOME ARGUMENTATIVE, YOU DEFEAT YOUR PURPOSE AND MAY LOSE CONTROL OF OR ESCALATE THE SITUATION.

2. DO be repetitive in the point you are trying to verbalize. If you repeat the same sentence over again (sometimes several times) in an assertive but calm and controlled tone an individual usually will lose interest in continuing verbally aggressive activity.
3. DO leave a silent break in between repetitive statements.

ONCE THE OTHER PARTY REALIZES ANGER IS FUTILE AND HAVING NO EFFECT, THEY WILL USUALLY CALM DOWN.

4. If available and there is no threat of physical violence, find a vacant room or area to meet with an irate client. Moving an upset individual away from an audience may help diffuse the situation. Ensure another employee has been notified to standby in case the situation escalates.
5. Repeated incidents of verbal abuse by the same individual should be documented and reported to an appropriate supervisor for discretionary action.

D. **DON'T's** when confronted with a hostile situation:

1. DON'T follow an irate client. Some individuals will want privacy and a little time to cool off. **LET THEM HAVE IT.**
2. DON'T involve co-workers in a verbally hostile situation. This will usually escalate the problem. If you are unable to bring the situation under control contact a supervisor or their designee.

3. DON'T send an irate client in to see a supervisor or co-worker unannounced. Let co-workers and supervisors know about the situation to allow for preparation and a cooling off period.
4. Don't engage in an argument or bait an irate individual. **THIS COULD ESCALATE A VERBAL SITUATION INTO A PHYSICAL ONE.**

E. Dealing with physical assault:

1. If you are attacked:
 - a. Protect yourself and try to get away from the attacker.
 - b. yell out for help. Make sure you are heard. **BE LOUD.** This could also help stop the attack.
 - c. **DO NOT** strike back. This will only escalate the situation.
2. If you witness an attack in progress:
 - a. Contact a co-worker to get help and to notify a supervisor, then,
 - b. Intervene by getting the attacker's attention. **DO NOT MAKE THREATS.** Try to reason with the individual using a controlled voice tone.
 - c. If the attack continues, intervention may be necessary to stop the attack and to restrain the attacker.
 - d. On an as needed basis, each office should prepare an intervention plan. The plan should include a method for sounding an alarm that will serve two purposes: 1) to signal that an attack is in progress and 2) to alert an intervention team/co-workers of where the incident is occurring. A group of volunteers could

receive specialized training on intervention techniques (see section “F”).

- e. As soon as possible, the victim should be moved out of view from the attacker.

NOTE: If the victim has been seriously injured and is down, DO NOT MOVE THEM.

- f. If possible, a supervisor should make the decision on whether or not authorities will be called. This choice will be made on an individual case basis.
- g. Move employees and clients out of the danger area and keep it clear until the situation is under control.
- h. Once the situation has been brought under control, a written documentation of the event should be done by a supervisor or their designee. The documentation should include names of involved individuals, witnesses, time, date and sequence of events.
- i. The appropriate Regional Manager will review documentation of a physical assault incident. An assessment should be done focusing on why the assault occurred and how it might have been prevented. The Regional Manager should also critique the handling of the incident from start to finish and provide a written report to the Chief of Field Operations for review.

II. Steps for Handling Abusive/Threatening Telephone Calls

- A. If a caller is abusive, advise them you will terminate the conversation if the abuse continues.
- B. If the caller continues verbal abuse (swearing, etc.), state you are ending the call and hang up the phone.

- C. Document the nature of the call, the caller's name (is known), the time, date, etc. If the call contained threats, contact your supervisor for further direction.

Supervisors should try to schedule training on an annual or as needed basis on techniques to defuse irate clients. New employees should also receive this information during orientation.

Contact Field Operations for information on available training and/or instructional materials to share with employees.