

Personal Safety - A Guide for City employees working in the field.

Introduction

There are inherent risks involved with working in the community. This manual identifies steps you can take to minimize your risk from the hazards that may be present while performing field work. It is intended for use by all City of Milwaukee employees who are required to perform work in the field.

Planning Ahead

If the address of your destination is in a location unfamiliar to you, try to find another person who may be familiar with the location to brief you regarding any known risks or possible hazards.

Contact the client ahead of time e.g., by phone or letter to schedule your visit when applicable.

Ask for precise driving directions and/or consult a map before leaving the office. Plan your route. Be aware of potential “safe havens” such as police stations, fire stations, or business offices en route to and from your destination.

Keep address files updated. Call the office to check-in at scheduled times. When working in pairs, stay together.

Leave your itinerary at the office. Route slips, regular call-ins, and check-in/check-out procedures should be used so that it is known where you are throughout the day and when you have safely returned at the end of the day. If your route changes significantly during the day, for example due to a cancelled appointment, be sure to call in to report your change of schedule.

Arrange work schedule so new or questionable visits are made early in the day. You’ll be less likely to find loiterers congregating on street corners, and you won’t get stuck in a potentially unsafe neighborhood after dark.

Carry your cell phone with you at all times. Make sure that the battery is charged and the phone is working properly prior to leaving the office. Program your cell phone speed dial numbers so that your supervisor, 9-1-1, and other emergency numbers can be dialed with the push of one button if needed.

9-1-1 dispatch cannot reliably identify your location when you are calling from a cell phone. You must be able to verbally give the dispatcher your location (street address or at least cross street names) in order for the dispatcher to send help to the right place.

Carry a minimal amount of cash.

Make sure you have all necessary items with you when you enter the house, apartment, business, etc. so that you don’t need to make multiple trips to the car.

Lock or conceal your valuables in the trunk of your car before leaving the office. Take only items necessary to do your job. Select forms, brochures, etc. that you will need each day and arrange them to fit in a briefcase or other carrying device.

Purses, backpacks, or other unnecessary items should not be taken on site visits.

Familiarize yourself with MPD and MFD locations.

Report all accidents/incidents to your supervisor.

Dress For Success

Sturdy footwear is useful for field workers. Wear shoes that you can run in.

Wear clothes that make it easy for you to move fast, and are appropriate for the type of encounters that may arise.

Avoid wearing expensive jewelry or any accessory that could be dangerous (dangling scarves, necklaces, etc.).

Carry a noise-making device, such as a whistle or a personal security alarm.

When walking on a street or sidewalk, stand tall, do not make prolonged eye contact, look over passerby heads, do not smile at strangers, and walk purposefully, even if lost.

Always wear your identification badge.

Car Safety

Always drive defensively and safely. Obey all driving laws, including wearing your seat belt and observing speed limits. Be aware of other vehicles and surroundings.

Check to see if your car is equipped with emergency supplies.

Know who to call if your vehicle breaks down.

Be sure the gas tank is full. Know where approved gas stations are located.

Drive with your doors locked, and if possible, your car windows up.

Always lock your car. Lock door with your keys in your hand so you do not lock them inside the car.

Always carry your keys in your hand when going to and from your car. Consider carrying two sets of car keys. One set to use and one set to have in reserve and concealed.

Don't leave equipment, cell phones, packages, or bags out on seats in view of passersby. Cover them up or put them under the seat or in the trunk if possible.

Do not attempt to drive through big puddles or over flooded roadways. Find an alternate route or reschedule the trip for another time when the roadway is clear.

Check your car insurance coverage before using your personal vehicle on the job.

If someone bumps you from behind or is following you, don't pull over at that spot, especially if it is isolated. Go to a public place with lots of light and people. Call 9-1-1.

Survey the Neighborhood

Pay attention to what is happening around you. Drive around the area and block of the site visit looking for fences, bushes, or other hiding places.

Look for places to go in case of an emergency: Block-watch homes, pay phones, gas stations, business offices, fire stations, police stations, or police cars.

Observe the activity near the location of the visit. Avoid groups of people who may be drinking, fighting, yelling, etc.

Be aware of individuals lurking about or acting suspicious. Do not make assumptions; appearances can be deceiving. Be observant of body language and behavior.

Do not look at or become involved in apparent crime or suspicious situations involving people on the street. **LEAVE THE SITUATION.** Don't use your cell phone where you can be seen. They may think you are calling the police and become violent. Once you are in a safe place, call the police, your supervisor, or another appropriate authority and report the incident.

Pay attention to signs like No Trespassing, Beware of Dog, Beware of the Owner, as they may be an indicator of the resident's attitude toward strangers.

If relatives or neighbors are or become a safety problem, do not make the visit alone.

Signs like Neighborhood Watch are indicators that others in the community have an increased awareness and interest in what goes on in their neighborhood.

Trust your instincts. If you are feeling uncomfortable, cancel the visit, reschedule or request assistance from your supervisor, other personnel, or the police as appropriate.

Parking and leaving the car

Choose a parking space that is in the open and near a light source that offers the safest walking route to the dwelling. Make sure you have a working flashlight in the car.

It is always better to park on the street than in a driveway. That way, there is less danger of being blocked in when you want to leave.

Park in the direction you want to go when leaving the visit. Know your location and the most direct route out of the area when it is time to go.

Beware of dead-end streets and dark deserted parking areas. Have an escape plan.

If possible, try to park where you can see your car and watch it periodically during the visit.

Remember that parking in front of your destination is the shortest distance between two points. If you cannot find a safe parking place, cancel the visit or travel with a companion or escort.

Watch for rubble and broken glass that can flatten a tire or a ditch that can immobilized your car.

Approaching the dwelling/building

Maintain a self-confident, self-assured posture and attitude. Walk briskly, with purpose, looking around to identify potentially hazardous situations.

Notice individuals, be aware of their movements and try to keep them from cutting you off from an escape route or cornering you. If you think you are being followed, turn and LOOK. If you **are** being followed, cross the street and go to the nearest public place and call for help. If you see no place ahead to go to for help, cross the street and RUN back the way you came. Don't hesitate.

Whenever possible, keep to the middle of the sidewalk and sidestep dark alleyways, bars, and groups of loiterers.

Be aware of other regular visitors in the community (*like the mailperson*) who can advise you of hazards like dogs or come to your assistance if needed. Don't be afraid to converse with other public officials, work crews, etc. It lets them know you are in the area and you can get useful information from them regarding your surroundings.

If a group is blocking the doorway to your client's dwelling or business, leave and reschedule your visit.

If you are verbally confronted, maintain a professional manner. Respond directly and don't attempt to answer verbal challenges. Do not engage in confrontations. Leave the situation.

If you decide it is safe to enter the dwelling or business, make a mental note of other exits as soon as you're inside. Use caution when using stairways. Notice if people or objects are located on the stairs or landings. When walking in dimly lit hallways or deserted stairwells walk quickly and be especially vigilant.

Pause at the door and listen before knocking. If you hear loud quarreling, sounds of fighting, or some other disturbance, leave immediately.

Knock on the door, identify yourself, and use the client's name. Stand to the side of the door until you receive a response. Avoid standing in front of a window.

When the door is opened, decide if you will enter the home or invite the client outside, depending on what you can see happening inside the house.

Say your name clearly, the agency you represent, and why you are there.

If your business can be conducted outside, then do so. Talk or discussion can be done at the doorway.

Do not enter a home unless there is an adult present. If a child answers the door, tell the child to go get their mother or father.

Be aware of signs on the front door directing you to the back or another location, especially if you do not feel comfortable. DO NOT follow these signs. Instead leave the home and call the client to confirm your appointment, asking them to meet you at the front door.

Do not enter if you suspect that an unsafe situation exists. If the person you are there to see does not answer the door or is not there, leave and reschedule your visit. Your supervisor will support your decision to leave or not enter the home or business if you are feeling unsafe.

If you are using an elevator, approach it with special caution. Don't get in until you've sent it down to the basement and waited for it to come back up. This technique protects you from inadvertently getting into a car that's headed down and possibly facing a stranger in a deserted basement. If possible use an empty elevator. Always stand next to the door and by the control panel. If having a problem, push all the buttons so the elevator stops on all the floors presenting a greater chance of escape.

If there is something suspicious about a person waiting to get on the elevator with you, step aside and wait. If someone suspicious gets on while you're already in the elevator, get off as soon as possible.

If possible, have the client meet you in the lobby or at the front door. Give them an approximate time of arrival so they will be looking for you.

In the Home or Business

Use the same principles inside the dwelling or building as you have used outside to get there including planning an escape route and trying to keep from being trapped or having to go through someone to get out.

If you decide it's safe to enter, don't let your guard down. Be alert to signs of violence, drinking, or sexual advances, however subtle, from either a client or a member of the family.

Ask to be seated during interviews. Choose a hard chair if possible. This will decrease the risk of carrying home unwanted visitors and/or sitting on a wet unknown substance. Give them your business card; be prepared to show them your official identification.

If possible sit so your back is to a solid wall, not to an open space.

Sit as close to the door as possible.

Ask permission before doing any work. Explain what you will be doing.

Be aware of other people in the building and traffic in and out of the building. You may want to reschedule for a time when fewer people are present or you can bring someone with you.

If weapons are visible (e.g. guns or knives), evaluate the situation's potential for danger. Leaving and conducting the visit at another time or location may be the safest choice.

Before going into another part of the dwelling, or building, or using the phone, ask permission. Remember you are a visitor.

Do not go into a dark room (or basement or attic) first. Have the client go first and turn on the light. Follow, never lead, even if you have been here before.

Leaving the Visit

When you have completed the visit, thank the client for allowing you to come into their home or business.

Be sure to collect all your belongings. Have your car keys in hand as you leave the building.

Be aware of what is going on outside as you leave. Watch what is going on around you, especially outside activities that may have changed since you entered.

If there is a crowd of people, observe the activities they are involved in and how it may affect you and your safety.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR PERSONAL SAFETY AND SECURITY

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS. Do not enter homes, businesses, or neighborhoods when you suspect that an unsafe situation exists. If you find yourself in an unsafe situation:

- Don't show fear.

- Try not to show any facial expression.

- Control your breathing.

- Speak slowly and lower the pitch of your voice, talk from your diaphragm.

- Repeat what you are there for.

- Watch your hands so they don't move nervously. Maintain personal space.

- Maintain eye contact, but don't try to stare anyone down.

- Watch body language.

- Don't challenge, but be assertive, especially if lewd comments are made.

- Check your watch, say you need to call your office because they are waiting for your call.

- Stand up and leave.