

# Words From the

By Jon Rubin

It has been almost 20 years since the first “field” day of my graduate school internship in child welfare. I was working toward my master of social work degree and my one distinct memory of that day is of my supervisor, after giving me my supply of pens, paper and a desk calendar, letting me know to always put the location I was going to be at on my desk calendar.

Was this so that she could track my appointments and she could know that I was visiting my families? Was it so I could have a visual aid as to how often I was going out into the field? Was it so I could be found in case another family was looking for me? No, as she explained to me, it was in case something happened to me and no one could find me, she would know where to start looking.

As times changed, many child welfare workers now carry cell phones and keep their appointments listed in their computers. I moved on from being a caseworker to supervisor and later an administrator and training director. But what has not changed in the field of child welfare, and social work in general, is the importance of ensuring the safety of workers when they leave their office to complete a home visit and the need for social workers to consider their own safety every time they leave the office to conduct a home visit or see a family.

It needs to be said that despite the deeply emotional reasons that social workers are called on to visit families, few family members would ever threaten or harm a worker. Most families do want what is best for their children and are willing to engage with a worker when properly approached. However, I believe what kept me safe through hundreds of home visits was an acute awareness for my own safety and forethought about where I was going and what the risks were.

Maintaining the awareness of the risks social workers face every time they head into the field is the single most important factor in keeping workers safe. Information and strategies for safety will help, but without the acknowledgment of the risks and the alertness to the issue, the worker remains at risk.

I recall having many conversations about the appropriateness of bringing a law-enforcement officer along for that first home visit. Obviously that plan would help ensure the safety of the caseworker, and for the moment, the children, but building rapport with that family would become next to impossible. How do you weigh ensuring the safety of the worker with the desire to appropriately engage families on initial home visits? Those questions are never easily answered, yet such decisions are made on every report. Because of the desire to properly engage children and families, the majority of home visits by child welfare workers take place with workers going out to a home unprotected, sometimes unannounced, and often with little information about the family or the circumstances they are walking into.

It is unfortunate that with every new referral, the assigned caseworker has to comb the intake information, not only for the safety threats reported regarding the children in the home, but for potential threats for them as they approach a family. Allegations of drug and alcohol use, a history of violent behavior and isolated living environments are only a few of the red flags that workers have to consider when strategizing that first home visit.

From the social worker perspective, what are the key points for discussion when considering worker safety?

What de-escalation techniques can serve social workers best when things get tense? When is it OK to just get up and leave a home because your gut tells you it is unsafe? Is it enough to just “trust your judgment,” training a caseworker to park his or her car on the street and not in a driveway to make it easier to get away a real strategy or a simple example of how truly vulnerable social workers are in the field? These are all questions that every child welfare worker, supervisor, administrator and training director should be considering as they do their work.

Child welfare leaders do provide lessons about remaining calm in the face of confrontation, stating the purpose of your visit in a clear, non-threatening way, and how to read body language as part of worker training. But to truly protect staff in the field, common train-

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With all that being said, with resources tight and children in need of protection, the sense or responsibility for safety often falls on the workers themselves.

After moving from being a direct service caseworker to a supervisor, I remember my own discomfort advising staff on the other line of a panicked call that they did the right thing leaving a home that they felt unsafe in and strategizing about what to do next. Homes with empty shell casings from

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fired weapons on the floor, homes with large groups of people shouting at the worker just for coming, and homes with unfriendly dogs were all obstacles workers had to face in efforts to protect a child. Yet it remains a constant battle for workers and supervisors to know what to do each time a worker leaves the office.

As an intake supervisor, the constant controversy at my office was about my letting intake workers go out two at a time because I felt it was safer and the workers were more comfortable. Caseloads were high at the agency and I was told that if I had enough staff to send them out two at a time, then some of my staff could help in other units. Looking at the “big picture” needs of child welfare agencies as a whole requires a perspective beyond just the needs of one worker or even one unit. But these types of decisions should all be framed with the thought of maintaining the safety of social workers who are protecting children. Child welfare intake workers are required to respond to reports and allegations of violence in a home often where no prior police or agency records exist. When going to such a home, how could you know the dangers until you got there?

During my last years working in direct child welfare practice, I was the administrator for an intake department that was generally staffed by young women, often in their 20s, who had amazing courage and willingness

to go on home visits in neighborhoods that police officers had told me never to let my staff go to alone. I recall a conversation with a veteran officer who felt that none of my staff should enter apartments alone that he would never send an officer to without backup. Yet that scenario happened frequently and continues today.

I am thankful that I don't have any horror stories to add to this article about how I or one of my staff was attacked or injured. I think that is because when I felt threatened, I was comfortable in attempting to de-escalate a situation or I made a decision to leave. When any of my staff were uncomfortable in their surroundings, they knew that they had my support to leave and come back with the police if they felt the situation was out of their control. There were many times when we were thrown out of homes when making efforts to see a child. Again, for me and my staff, a combination

of common sense and gut feelings became the final judge of what to do at those times.

Looking back, I never felt that I ever left a child in an imminently dangerous situation, nor would I. Thinking about it, I'm reminded of being on a plane when the stewardess announces that if the oxygen masks come down, a passenger should put one over their own face and then be in much better position to help others. Whenever I or one of my staff felt threatened or in an out-of-control situation, we first got control of ourselves and our safety, and were then in a much better position to protect the children we were there to serve.

Today in the field of child welfare, such tools as realistic job previews are being used across the nation to help recruit a workforce prepared to deal with the dangers of being a social worker. Training programs nationwide are training staff on personal safety, engagement skills and de-escalation techniques. But with every resource at our disposal in this instant information age society, it is still necessary for workers to let their supervisors know where they're going, and when they'll be back. Let's hope that that information will never have to be used. ■

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