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Safety Planning

What exactly is “Safety Planning?” It is defined by the Program Standards as “A *detailed program of action created by the victim and the comprehensive victim services program staff for the purpose of improving the victim’s safety.*” The Standards also indicate that your office must have defined procedures for safety planning as part of your crisis response protocol. While this protocol is created by your office to serve the needs of your community, the Standards provide a framework:

If the victim is in danger, a safety plan addressing the immediate situation shall be developed utilizing strategies for achieving physical safety. Those strategies may include alternative housing including shelter, alternative contact plans, no contact, where appropriate the referral to a domestic violence or sexual assault program, obtaining a protection from abuse order or other safety strategies.

The Office of Victims' Services wanted to share some strategies you may want to incorporate into your safety planning. Many agencies are revising/updating their safety planning as they incorporate SAVIN [Statewide Automated Victim Information and Notification] into their county. If you have not updated your protocol recently, you will discover many recent technological changes have a direct impact on safety planning. Some are positive and enable increased safety while others can actually increase the danger when misused by offenders.

Providing options for victims is a valuable service. But as we all know, it is crucial to rely on the victim and their sense of safety. In most cases, they know how the offender will react and the likely outcome of their actions. It is important to keep in mind that a “one-size-fits-all” safety plan that works for all victims does not exist. While a particular safety plan strategy may increase safety for the majority of victims, it may actually increase the danger for a victim in a particular situation. It is important to remember that every situation is different and each safety plan should be created for the present circumstances only. You may have to constantly revise a safety plan as conditions change. This fact sheet is intended only as an overview. The strategies are written in the first person so you can share them with the victims you serve. We hope it stimulates you to conduct further research into this ever-changing, yet incredibly important, area.

General Suggestions

- Make copies of keys and important documents and give them to a relative, close friend, etc. Anything relevant to the victim or his/her children should be copied, such as a protection from abuse (PFA) order, birth certificate, drivers license, will, insurance papers, prescriptions, social security card, check book, bank statements, credit cards, medical records, welfare card, marriage license, etc.
- Include a blank check with your emergency travel bag. If your emergency bag is discovered, it can be called a “tornado,” “hurricane” or “fire” emergency bag.
- Consider possible escape plans in advance. Think about which doors, windows, elevators, stairwells, fire escapes, etc. you might use. Purchase rope ladders to flee from the second floor. Consider fleeing on a bus, train, taxi, etc. Always have a back-up plan just in case something goes wrong with the original plan. If possible, rehearse your escape plan.
- Don’t ignore your workplace. Advise anyone who answers the phone to ensure proper screening occurs. Provide a picture of the offender to anyone who controls building access, such as a receptionist. Ask for an escort (security or co-workers) when going to/from your car to/from your home.
- Alert the school to ensure the offender is not allowed to pick up your children.
- Vary daily schedules and driving routes to avoid patterns.
- Back your car into the driveway with at least half a tank of gas. Keep the drivers door unlocked while the others are locked.
- Arrange a signal with a trusted neighbor. For example, if the porch light is on, call the police.
- Safety plan with your children, including identifying a safe place for your children to go for help. Have a code word you can use to let them know to leave the house or get help. Ensure they know not to try and defend you from the offender during a crime.
- For victims of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking who have moved to a location unknown to the offender, register with the Address Confidentiality Program (ACP) to have your mail forwarded to you from a substitute address. For details, go to www.paacp.state.pa.us.
- If fleeing from the offender, let your friends and family know you are safe, but try not to give them information about where you are going. Intentionally or not, they may give clues about your whereabouts to the offender.

- Try to avoid wearing anything around your neck (jewelry, ties, scarves, etc.) that could be used to strangle you.
- Create a false trail by calling hotels, schools, real estate agents, etc. in a place many hours away from where you are fleeing to.
- Carry a small combination whistle and flashlight keychain.

Important Technological Considerations

- Any cell phone will call 911. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandates all cellular carriers to put all 911 calls through, even for phones with no or an expired monthly service contract. So even if you have a phone with no service, carry it with you as it will still call 911.
- Ensure that an unknown cell phone is not in your car. Offenders are using cell phones to track victims through a GPS (Global Positioning System) installed in the phone. The offender will call the phone silently to get the GPS signal and know exactly where you are.
- Be aware that a GPS can be installed without a cell phone. What looks like a small black box on the underside of your car may actually be a GPS. As the technology advances, GPS's are becoming cheaper and smaller. In the near future, a "pen" inserted into a purse may actually be a GPS. Also be aware that your wireless laptop may function as a GPS by an offender with computer knowledge. To search your car or belongings for a GPS device, enlist the assistance of a law enforcement officer or a mechanic.
- Similarly, an offender may install a computer monitoring system (Spyware or Tracking) on your computer. These systems will track every keystroke you type or take a picture of the computer screen every few seconds. At a minimum make sure extensive Anti-Spyware is installed in your computer and have it scan your computer each time before using it. Since no "Anti-Spyware" system is perfect and new tracking systems are developed constantly, try and avoid using your personal computer in relation to your safety plan. Alternatively, use a computer the offender does not have access to, such as a computer at the library, to do relocation and safety research.
- Even without a tracking system installed, an offender can easily see what websites were visited by looking at a computer's Web visit history. This could reveal a search for a new location, a new job, a new apartment, etc. Fortunately, it is relatively easy and fast to erase your history after each computer session.

- Likewise, make sure that your call history on your cell phone is constantly deleted. In addition, be aware that many cell phone bills list each call that was made on the phone with the exact date and time.
- Offenders are also using small cameras to monitor victims. Hidden in smoke detectors, lamps, or a pin-sized hole in a wall, these high-resolution wireless cameras can even be activated remotely. Ask victims to check their homes or have law enforcement search for small holes or unidentifiable wiring.

As an advocate, you may be thinking what can I do to help? Keep yourself informed constantly about new technology so that you can effectively safety plan with victims. Offenders rely on the victim not knowing about such technology. Education is the key. By informing victims in your safety planning of their existence, victims can keep on the lookout. Victims can then look for patterns in the information the offender knows. This may alert you as to what type of system the offender is using or where the camera/GPS is located. Once you have determined how the offender is getting information, turn the technology against them. For example, if you learn a Spyware program is installed in your computer, you could create a false trail by doing “research” on locations you are not fleeing to, apartments in a town far away from where you are going, want ads in another location, etc. The bottom line is you need to keep up-to-date on technology. The internet provides a wealth of information for you. The Office of Victims’ Services is also planning training for victim advocates on this subject as well in the future.

Many crimes, like identity theft, drug labs, internet scams, child pornography, etc. dramatically rose after offenders learned how to commit them through misusing technology. Fortunately, these crimes fell once the public learned about these techniques and how to protect themselves. Adapting and changing your safety planning with technological changes to better serve victims of crime is a continuing process and one of the most important services you can provide to a victim.