

SUFFOLK COUNTY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

THREATS TO DSS PERSONNEL



John F. O'Neill, Commissioner



THREATS AGAINST EMPLOYEES

It is the intent of the Department of Social Services to create a safe environment for staff and the public who access our services. The Department will not tolerate threats or violence directed at staff. All staff should familiarize themselves with the DSS Threats Manual distributed during orientation. Below is a desk guide for quick reference.

- **All threats should be taken seriously**
- **Threats should be immediately reported to your Supervisor, Security, and Kevin Wilson (854-3354)**
- **A threat can be made in person, by FAX, phone, or e-mail**
- **If a threat has been left on an answering machine or e-mail, DO NOT ERASE THE MESSAGE**
- **If the threat is made in person or over the phone, write down exactly what was said ASAP.**
- **After the report is made to Security, Kevin Wilson will assist in calling the Police to file a complaint.**
- **Kevin Wilson will keep a record of all Department threats**
- **Please refer to the Threats to DSS Personnel for additional details**

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SECURITY SUPERVISOR – KEVIN WILSON – 854-9831

SECTION I
BACKGROUND

It is the intent of the Suffolk County Department of Social Services to create a safe workplace for staff and the public who access our services. The Department will not tolerate threats or violence directed at staff.

The purpose of this document is to:

- educate staff about the nature and types of threats;
- lay out steps that must be followed to deal with and report all threats;
- inform staff about the Agency's team approach to threat assessment;
- advise supervisors and managers of steps to take if a serious threat or a violent incident causes trauma in the workplace;
- discuss points managers must consider when reviewing a threat or violent incident to determine if changes in procedures are needed to better protect staff.

At the Department of Social Services, the goal is to establish a procedure for handling threats to ensure any threat made to or about a DSS employee will be assessed. If a threat assessment results in a determination of potential risk, the goal will be to take appropriate measures to manage and lower the risk to employees.

Threat assessment is an investigative and operational technique to determine and manage the risks when a potentially violent person poses or may pose a threat to a particular individual or group. In the workplace, threats of violence can come from the public, fellow employees, or as a result of domestic violence situations. Threats can be made in person, in the office or in the field, over the telephone, via the mail or even by fax. A threat can be made directly to the person who could be at risk or it could be made to a third party, either in DSS or outside of DSS. A threat can be vague, hidden, conditional, frivolous, or direct in its wording. A threat can be uttered to gain advantage in a power struggle, as a result of frustration or anger, or with the intent to cause harm. A threat may be considered unlawful as defined by criminal code or it may not. **Whatever the method of delivery, the precise words, the intent, or the legality, a threat can cause fear and trauma to potential targets, workers in their Unit, and others.**

In dealing with threats, everyone in the Agency has a responsibility. All employees have the responsibility to recognize obvious risks and the responsibility to minimize becoming the focus of aggression. Employees who receive a threat directed to them or any other employee are required to report that threat to Security. Security guards are required to report all threats to their chain of command. Security personnel, supervisors, and managers of all Divisions must participate in a team approach to threat assessment as described in this procedure. This includes evaluating potential risk and taking appropriate protective measures to lower that risk. Supervisors and managers of affected staff have the responsibility to manage the aftermath of trauma that results from threats and violence. All supervisors and managers are responsible for reviewing incidents for possible corrective action to better ensure the safety of their staff.

There are some important points about threats and violence that should be understood by everyone in the workplace:

1. All threats must be taken seriously but not all threats will result in violence.

An important factor in threat assessment is making the distinction between someone making (uttering) a threat and someone posing or actually presenting a threat. Some people who make threats ultimately pose threats while many people who make threats never pose threats. Conversely, some persons may present a grave threat but never articulate it prior to a violent act.

2. Violence is a process, as well as an act:

Violent behavior does not occur in a vacuum. Analysis shows violent acts are often the culmination of long-developing, identifiable trails of problems, conflicts, disputes, and failures. **It is often found, subsequent to an attack, that the perpetrator gave advance notice of his/her violent inclinations. Staff must heed any clues that may be given, by any individual, that express any intention to do violence. Persons who commit violence in the workplace often consider suicide in conjunction with homicide as their only option. A warning about suicide may also be a warning about homicide.**

3. Violence is the product of an interaction among three factors:

- The individual who takes violent action.
- Stimulus or triggering conditions that lead the subject to see violence as a solution to his or her problems.
- A setting that facilitates or permits the violence, or at least does not stop it from occurring.

4. Research in local social services districts in New York State has shown that staff who were involved in an incident have often reflected later that they could have said or done something differently that would have been safer.

Staff must protect themselves by learning to recognize obvious risks and by attempting to avoid them. It is important that workers develop the ability to minimize becoming the focus of aggression. When workers consider the most prudent words to say, they will choose “The regulations require that I close your case” or “The Court has decided this about your children” instead of “I am closing your case” or “I am taking your children away.” It is important to remember that in the “heat of the moment” we may not be so careful. In addition, workers must remember that the tone of voice and body language play an even greater role than the words actually used.

SECTION II

GENERAL POLICY

- A. All threats are to be taken seriously** and followed through to a logical conclusion that ensures the safety and security of the work environment. This includes threats from the public, other employees, and domestic violence situations involving employees.
- B. Threats must be addressed or responded to in some way. If a worker has received a threat, the appropriate response is either to attempt to defuse the threat or leave and get help. The precise response will vary depending upon many variables, including the worker's knowledge of and relationship with the client, the nature of the threat, the worker's level of skill in defusing difficult situations, and the worker's gut feeling relative to the level of danger presented. An important point to remember is that whenever a worker feels afraid, the best course of action is to get help.**
- C. All threats must be reported to both Security and the Worker's Supervisor.** This includes threats that are verbal, threats made in the office or field, and threats made over the telephone, by fax /mail, or spoken to a third party such as a contract agency.
- D. All threats must be assessed.** The first assessment of a threat is made by the person receiving the threat when he or she determines whether to defuse the threat or get help. Less serious threats will be further assessed by the Security Guard and the Worker's Supervisor. More serious threats will be assessed jointly by the Security Supervisor and the worker's chain of command. Threats that occur in the field will be assessed by the worker and supervisor, with a report to security. The more serious threats that occur in the field will involve the Security Supervisor and the worker's chain of command.
- E. The Security Supervisor and the Division must review serious threats and critical incidents after the fact.** The goal of critical incident review is to see if processes need improvement to prevent similar incidents in the future.
- F. Managers must explore the need for stress debriefing sessions if workers have experienced trauma from serious threats or a critical incident. See Section IX, page 21, for more specific information.**

SECTION III

POLICE INVOLVEMENT/ SIGNING A CIVILIAN ARREST FORM

When to Contact the Police:

All DSS employees are required to report threats to Security. This applies to threats received in-person, over the phone, or by other means. In accordance with existing Agency procedures, Security will generally be the ones to contact the Police. **The Police should always be called if an employee believes he or she has been threatened and consequently fears for his or her safety. The Police should also be called if Security or the Supervisor fears for the safety of any DSS personnel.**

Even if an arrest is not probable (for example, the employee does not wish to sign a civilian arrest form or the threat does not appear to be unlawful), SCPD has requested that they be made aware of threats so that, at the least, they can write a field report. The field report will help to build a history by documenting an incident. This will assist in building a case against someone and help to establish a greater level of protection if there are future incidents.

NOTE: Even if Police are called, defusing techniques (where possible) and threat assessment procedures as described later in this document should be followed.

A Brief Overview of Unlawful Threats:

This section is for information purposes. It has been included so that DSS staff can better understand what may happen once the Police arrive on the scene. The law defines only certain threats as unlawful. Unlawful threats are either violations or misdemeanors.

To be unlawful, a threat must be fairly direct and must have communicated that the subject will be harmed in some way. The following threats are vague or hidden, frivolous, or conditional and most likely would not constitute unlawful behavior, although they can be frightening:

- Wishing harm: "I hope you die."
- "I'll report you and you'll lose your job."
- Vague, hidden: "I know where you live."
- Conditional and indirect: "If I don't get my money, you better watch out."
- Frivolous: "I'm going to blow up this whole state."

The following is an example of what could be an unlawful threat: "I'm going to punch your face." Verbal threats like this could constitute **"Harassment in the Second Degree" which is a violation.** It is important to remember and to write down the exact wording of a threat that is uttered.

Unlawful threats that are delivered via mechanical or electronic means (mail, phone, e-mail or fax, or even in writing via a speedy request) are generally considered a higher level of threat than most verbal threats. They can rise to the level of Aggravated Harassment in the Second Degree, which is a Class A misdemeanor.

Signing a Civilian Arrest Form:

The police generally cannot arrest for a **violation** they did not witness. The person who received the threat can sign a civilian arrest form. The police can then take the individual into custody (this is called “civilian arrest”). If an employee signs either an arrest form or a complaint form, the employee should use his or her Agency address. An employee should not use his or her home address.

If the civilian arrest form is signed, it is the responsibility of the person who signs the civilian arrest form to follow through with the signing of a complaint at the Police precinct and with appearing at court, if necessary. An investigator from the Agency’s Special Investigations Unit will be assigned to accompany or meet the employee at the Police precinct. The role of the investigator will be to follow up on the case to be sure it makes its way consistently through the criminal justice system. The investigator will prepare a report on the background of the person who made the threat. This information will be available to the worker if the worker wants to have it. SIU staff will follow-up with Crime Control and the District Attorney’s office to track the progress of the case. The DSS employee will be kept informed of any developments in the case.

County Indemnification in Case of Suit for False Arrest:

In cases of civilian arrest, there exists the possibility that the employee could be sued for false arrest. It is crucial that the employee be certain that the individual named as the perpetrator is the person who made the threat. If a threat is anonymous, the employee will be able to report the threat to the police but cannot sign a civilian arrest form.

“The County will provide for the defense and indemnification of any employee who is sued for false arrest, in addition to other civil actions, provided that the employee was, among other things, acting within the scope of his/her employment*. For all intents and purposes, indemnification means financial reimbursement. According to Suffolk County statute, the County Attorney will first make the determination of whether the employee will be represented and indemnified. However, other conditions must be met. These conditions include, but are not limited to: the lawsuit must be of a civil nature; the employee must cooperate with the County Attorney’s office in defending the action; the County cannot be the party suing; and there cannot be any disciplinary proceeding pending against the employee for the act in question. It should be noted that if there is a conflict of interest between the employee and the County Attorney’s Office, as determined by either the County Attorney’s Office or a court of competent jurisdiction, the employee would be entitled to representation elsewhere so long as certain other requirements are met.” --from the May 14, 1999 Memorandum from Suffolk County Attorney Robert J. Cimino to DSS Deputy Commissioner William C. Jones.

In the event that Agency personnel are served with a “Notice of Claim” (notice that someone is suing the employee), “Summons and Complaint,” or other Court process, such documents should be copied by a Center Manager or Bureau Director. Originals of such documents should then be forwarded to Terilyn DiPaola (854-9809), in the Mary Gordon Building, who will forward them to the County Attorney’s office. Delivery to the County Attorney’s office must occur within five days

after the employee is served. If an Agency employee is served with papers, he or she should make no statements concerning the incident to anyone outside the Agency other than members of the Suffolk County Police Department or the County Attorney.

Leave time will not be charged to the worker's Time and Accrual Record (T&A) during regular working hours for Court appearances and conferences related to the arrest complaint. Overtime will be authorized if necessary.

***acting within the scope of his/her employment:**

“The most discretionary of the factors that would entitle employees to representation and indemnification is whether the employee was acting within the scope of his/her duties. Voluminous case law exists defining what this phrase means. Acting within the scope of employment does mean something more than being on the job. Each case would have to be examined according to its facts. Intentional or reckless wrongdoing on the part of the employee would take his/her acts or omissions out of the scope of employment. It should be understood that the Office of the County Attorney determines in the first instance whether an employee is acting within the scope of his/her employment at the time of the event that gives rise to the claim. If the County Attorney's Office determines that the employee was not acting within the scope of his/her employment, there is no obligation to defend or for that matter, indemnify.” -- from the May 14,1999 Memorandum from Suffolk County Attorney Robert J. Cimino to DSS Deputy Commissioner William C. Jones.

SECTION IV

THREATS RECEIVED IN THE OFFICE: IN PERSON, TELEPHONE, WRITTEN

IN-PERSON THREATS AT RECEPTION OR IN AN INTERVIEW

A. The first question to ask is: “Am I in immediate danger?”

If the worker has reason to believe that violence is imminent or if violence is in process, the worker must remove himself/herself from the client’s presence and notify Security immediately. In the event that Security is not immediately available, call 911. Other workers should be warned and the supervisor should be notified as the situation dictates.

B. If the danger is not immediate:

The appropriate response is for someone to begin defusing the situation. Who does the defusing will depend on the nature of the threat as described below. The goal in this situation is not necessarily to remove the client from the building. The goal is to get to a safer level of interaction where the client will begin to retract the threat and we will be able to resume business with the client. A threat may be the only tool a client knows how to use in a frustrating situation. If the defusing is handled well, most people will say they are sorry, that they didn’t mean to threaten. If it is not possible to get to this point, Security will take appropriate action to remove the client from the building or law enforcement will intercede. At this point, further assessment of the risk from the threat will need to be made.

If at any time an employee feels he has been threatened and is fearful or if Security or the Supervisor are concerned that there may be a threat to any DSS personnel, the Police should be called. See Section III, page 6.

1. WHEN THE WORKER:

- IS THE TARGET OF A SERIOUS THREAT OR
- BELIEVES A THREAT AGAINST ANOTHER IS SERIOUS OR
- IS AFRAID

Worker’s Role

It is generally NOT considered the best practice for a worker who is the target of a serious threat to:

- Attempt to continue the business at hand
- Attempt to de-escalate the situation, or
- Be a member of the assessment team.

When a worker believes a threat to be serious and the threat creates fear or concern to the worker it is generally advisable for agency business to cease and the worker to disengage from the interview.

The worker should exit the interview booth and advise Security of the situation. Next, the worker should find the supervisor and explain the background of the problem and the threat.

At this point, the worker should stay behind and not re-enter the interview area. The worker may need to get some help to deal with the anger/fear that s(he) may feel as a result of the threat.

Security Guard's Role

Security will go to the interview booth as soon as the worker has left to get the Supervisor. Security will assess the situation and proceed as indicated. If defusing is possible at this point, Security will explain to the client that every threat is taken seriously and that the Supervisor will be coming to speak to the client about the problem.

Security will let the Supervisor know if it is okay to enter the interview booth to speak to the client. Once the Supervisor enters the interview booth, Security will assume stand-by mode. If the client indicated any retraction to Security, Security should advise the Supervisor. Regardless of the outcome of the defusing attempt, Security will be responsible to write an incident report documenting the facts of the occurrence.

Supervisor's Role

The Supervisor should go to the interview area immediately after being briefed by the worker. The Supervisor should not enter the interview booth until Security has signaled the okay. Once in the interview booth, the Supervisor should find out if Security has any additional information. The Supervisor should then explain to the client that every threat is taken seriously here. He/she should ask the client to explain what led up to this and/or what has made the client so angry?

The goals of the interview between the supervisor and the client, with Security standing by, are to:

- a. let the client know that his/her behavior has been noticed and to communicate in a professional way that the behavior is unacceptable;
- b. permit the client's story to be related to a third party;
- c. get to a place where the client will retract the threat in some way;
- d. restore, if possible, enough calm to resume the client's business;
- e. gather some information about the client that can be used to assess the threat that is posed and to manage the threat if defusing is not successful.

If the defusing is successful, the supervisor should resume the client's interview to the degree possible or assign a different worker to the task. It would not generally be considered prudent to have the original worker resume with the client at this point. The supervisor should, however, lay groundwork for the possibility that the client may be working with the threatened worker sometime in the future. The supervisor must also

realize that the worker who was threatened may need some help in dealing with his/her own feelings of anger/fear that arose as a result of being threatened.

2. OTHER THREATS

In instances where a worker does not believe the client to be capable of carrying out the threat or the threat does not seem serious or cause concern, the threat must still be addressed. The worker should generally:

- cease conducting routine agency business for the moment;
- begin a defusing process using active listening skills: “What has happened to make you so angry? Tell me about it.”;
- explain the agency policy towards threats;
- allow for retraction or apology;
- continue agency business where possible;
- try to alert Security of a potential problem;
- report the threat and the outcome to Security.

In these cases, workers should be aware of Security’s need to know about a potentially violent situation. Security should be aware of a worker’s need to deescalate and to allow the client to vent their feelings as part of the defusing process. Note about venting: By venting, we mean expression of the emotions of anger or frustration without targeting the worker in a personal attack.

To alert Security that there is a potential problem, the worker in this situation could use code words. These would have to be decided on in a particular location ahead of time. For example, getting the attention of another worker in a nearby interview booth and saying “ Could you get me that red binder on the blue shelf?” would alert the other worker that Security needs to know about a potential problem. That worker could then discreetly inform Security of a need for standby.

3. TIPS ON REMOVING ONESELF FROM THE CLIENT’S PRESENCE:

- **If under attack, obviously the worker should leave the interview desk or booth immediately.** A worker should try to back off without turning his back unless it is necessary to do so to make a quick escape.
- **If not under attack, the worker should attempt to leave a potentially threatening situation in a cautious way.** A worker should be careful that his/her exit does not escalate a situation. It is generally **not** advisable to remove yourself from a client’s presence on a reception line or at an interview area without saying something to the client. It may be good to say, for example, “I’m going to get someone else who can help you.”

- **When a client utters a threat about another worker**, the worker who is present should consider that the client might see the worker as not caring or not willing to listen if he leaves the client's presence to get help. The worker, if needing to leave, may want to say something like, "You sound serious. Something must have gone very wrong for you to be saying this. I'm going to get someone who can help."
- **It is important to be sincere and never to lie to a client** when making a statement prior to leaving. For example, it is not advisable for a worker to say that he is going to photocopy and then return with a Security Guard.
- **When there is a low level of escalation** a worker may need to get away to collect himself, get feedback from someone else on how to handle the situation, or give the client some breathing space to cool down. Any of the following remarks may be appropriate, depending on the situation:

"Excuse me for a minute; I need to photocopy some of your documents."

"I'm going to check on the regulation/procedure for this to make sure I'm giving you the right information."

"Would you like me to give you a few minutes to be alone?"

- **Workers should be careful not to leave a client waiting too long in an interview booth.** This can escalate the situation further if the client feels he/she is being ignored.

4. WHEN CLIENTS UTTER THREATS ON THEIR WAY OUT:

If a Security Guard or a worker hears the client utter a threat on the way out of the building, it is best to let the client go. Often this verbalization is a substitute for violent action or it is said to save face. The worker should report the description of the client and the words of the threat to Security immediately. Security will follow up as appropriate and document the facts in a report.

5. WHEN ATTEMPTS TO DEFUSE A THREAT SITUATION FAIL:

- **Avoid provoking the situation further:**
When attempts at defusing fail, staff should be careful not to say the following provocative statements:
"You're finished."
"Security, throw this client out."
- **Who terminates an interview and how:**
If an interview is to be terminated because a situation cannot be defused, Security or the supervisor will advise the client that there is nothing more that can be done

to help the client today and they will tell the client what (s)he must do so we can conduct business at another time. At this point, Security will request that the client leave the building. If the client refuses to leave, the Police will be called. If it becomes necessary, the client will be arrested.

- **Future Mandatory Stand-by:**

If a client does not retract a threat, all future contacts between the Client and Agency personnel will be subject to mandatory Security stand-by.

- **Further Threat Assessment:**

If it is thought that the client could still have intentions of carrying out the threats, the Security Supervisor must be called. The Security Supervisor, his chain of command and the worker's chain-of- command will then become a team to work on larger-scale threat assessment (See Section VIII, page 18). **The worker's Division will keep the worker informed of the progress of the threat assessment and management.**

6. WRITTEN REPORTS OF THREATS:

Workers are responsible to report all threats to Security. Security will complete the form "OFFENSE/INCIDENT REPORT" regardless of the outcome of the incident.

WRITTEN THREATS

Written threats may be received on a Speedy Request or other document that is hand delivered. They may also be received via the mail, fax, or e-mail. Care should be taken to preserve these documents as they may be used as evidence. E-mail should be printed but not deleted. If the threat comes from someone who is in the Center, it should be regarded as if the offender is prepared to act on it immediately. If the content of a written document constitutes an unlawful threat, the subject may face more serious legal action as the law regards this as a crime. Security should be notified immediately when any written threat is received.

TELEPHONE THREATS

When a worker receives a threat over the phone, even if it is not directed at the worker, it is important to attempt to obtain as much information as possible before ending the call. It is very important that the caller's exact words be used in reporting the threat. If possible, the person who receives the call should write notes as they are speaking to the caller. Also, the worker should attempt to put the caller on a speaker-phone to allow coworkers to witness the statements. If a threat is received on voicemail, the message should not be deleted; it could be needed as evidence.

SECTION V

THREATS IN THE FIELD - FROM CLIENTS, FAMILIES, ETC.

The “**Agency-Wide Field Safety Policy,**” distributed in July 1996, is reprinted on the following page (page 15) in its entirety. It is still valid in light of this document. At this point, however, a reminder must be added to all field staff. **Field staff are reminded that they are required to report all threats or other incidents that occur in the field.**

The worker’s supervisor and the worker will assess the risk from a threat made in the field and develop a plan to minimize the risk if it is necessary for the Agency business to continue in the field. They should also:

- discuss (with the Security Supervisor) whether any additional safeguards need to be put in place in the building as a result of the threat in the field; and
- determine whether any warning should be issued to other field workers in the Agency (Field workers from all over the Agency and their supervisors will need to be alert to the fact that other Agency staff may also be visiting that same client).

The more serious threats will involve the Security Supervisor and his chain of command and the worker’s chain of command in the division. See Section VIII, Threat Assessment, on page 18.

AGENCY-WIDE FIELD SAFETY POLICY
(established July 1996)

The Suffolk County Department of Social Services is committed to providing a safe working environment for staff as they perform their duties. It is DSS policy that workers are not expected to risk lives, health or safety.

Field staff, who perform their duties in the community, work in a less controlled environment than the office. An extra measure of safety awareness and preparedness is necessary to increase the safety of field staff.

The purpose of this document is to restate and expand upon existing Agency field safety policy. **The bottom-line is that the safety of the worker must come first and it is the responsibility of field staff, their supervisors, and their administrators to work towards that goal.**

Agency field staff should routinely assess their own risk factors during the process of their work. Risk factors include past history of violence or threats of violence, and situations where opposition to services could be expected.

If there are strong indications of potential danger prior to a field visit, the worker should confer with the supervisor. The supervisor will determine:

- If a home visit is warranted under the circumstances
- How many DSS workers should make the visit
- Whether law enforcement personnel should accompany the worker (this refers specifically to those situations where the relationship with the Department of Social Services could be adversarial, e.g. Child Protection.)

At the time of the home visit, field staff will evaluate whether the visit should be made, continued or rescheduled. Examples of risk factors at this juncture are:

- Lack of any apparent safe approach to the home that would enable the worker to avoid dogs, hazards, loiterers, etc.
- Evidence of substance abuse affecting the behavior of clients or others present
- The clients or others become physically or verbally abusive
- Weapons are suspected, seen, or being used

A decision by field staff to terminate a home visit will be assumed to be correct as it pertains to the imminent danger at the time of the specific visit. Field staff shall provide notification to a supervisor as soon as possible of what has occurred and they will schedule time to plan for immediate follow-up on the case situation.

SECTION VI

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SITUATIONS

All employees should be cognizant of the importance of safeguarding against threats arising from domestic violence situations involving themselves or other employees.

A. The Agency's building access procedures require the following action:

“If a relative or friend comes to visit an employee, Reception or Security must call the worker. The worker must come to Reception to identify the visitor. The relative/friend will then be logged in and given a visitor's badge. The worker is responsible to escort the relative/friend into and out of the restricted area.”

B. Stalking, Orders of Protection, etc.

Individuals who are threatened, are being stalked, or are fearful of physical harm should take steps to protect themselves and others at the workplace. It is critical for the worker to notify the Security Guard in the facility of the threat. Security will conduct a discrete and confidential interview to gain pertinent information that can be used to guard against an incident in the workplace. This will include information about existing orders of protection, identifying information about the individual in question, and whether the individual is known to be armed.

Victims should be aware that it is possible to obtain an order of protection that would prohibit the perpetrator from entering the DSS facility unless he or she has a DSS reason for being there. With this order of protection, Security can summon the Police for arrest as soon as the perpetrator shows up at the facility, instead of having to wait for the perpetrator to do something more serious.

Please note: Victims of domestic violence may be reluctant to provide information if they fear retaliation from the potentially violent individual and/or reprisals in the workplace. Those who have come forward in the past have been encouraged and accompanied by their fellow workers. Supervisors and Managers need to be aware of the need to foster an environment of support, free of the fear of reprisals.

C. Managers and Supervisors should give consideration to the following steps that may help to protect victims of domestic violence:

Relocating a target to a different job site, assigning a new telephone number, use of a pseudonym (see the procedure “Use of Actual Names/Pseudonyms During Public Contact” from 1/98), or assigning the victim to a less exposed or vulnerable job function. In taking any of the above steps, Managers and Supervisors should work with the employee who is a victim to ensure that the solution will actually provide a greater degree of protection. Care should be taken that a protective measure is not construed as punishment of the victim. Solutions should protect the rights of the employee and provide a safer work environment for all employees.

SECTION VII

WHEN ONE EMPLOYEE THREATENS ANOTHER EMPLOYEE

Incidents of imminent danger by another employee must be reported immediately to law enforcement personnel by dialing 911; Security should also be notified of the 911 call. All other incidents shall be reported to a supervisor and Security as soon as possible. Supervisory intervention and threat assessment must occur immediately to ensure the safety of the threatened employee. Additionally, in accordance with the Suffolk County Workplace Violence Prevention Program, the threatened employee should contact the department's **Workplace Violence Coordinator, Kevin Wilson (854-9831)**. Complaints of workplace violence will be investigated thoroughly in a timely manner utilizing County policies and procedures.

Suffolk County is actively committed to providing a healthy and safe environment for all County personnel. Threats, threatening behavior, or acts of violence by or against County employees, visitors, and all other individuals on Suffolk County owned or leased property will not be tolerated. Any individuals who violate this policy will be removed from Suffolk county property. Violations of this policy by County employees will lead to disciplinary action which may include dismissal; under certain circumstances referral to law enforcement for criminal prosecution will be necessary. Acts of workplace violence include, but are not limited to: physically harming another; shoving; pushing; harassing; intimidating; coercing; brandishing weapons; and threats or discussion of engaging in those activities.

Supervisors should be aware of the Agency's policies on Sexual Harassment so that, where appropriate, referrals can be made to the Agency's **Sexual Harassment Officer, Traci Barnes, Assistant Commissioner, 854-9867**.

SECTION VIII

THREAT ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Threat assessment and management is a joint process that must involve Security and the Division working together. Security has been handling serious threats to DSS personnel for several years and as a result is developing a body of knowledge and expertise. Certain protocols for better ensuring the safety of staff have been developed and the goal is that they should be applied consistently to staff from all areas of DSS. Security also has the connections and relationships with law enforcement that are necessary to assist us in these situations. Divisions must be diligent in reporting serious threats to enable the process of threat management to begin without delay.

Dealing with threats is not a simple issue. It is possible to err by overreacting as well as by under-reacting. Basically, the question to answer in a threat assessment process is “Is this person venting or does he or she really mean to do harm?” The most effective approach to threat assessment is to think of a threat as a process, a communication of how frustrated or desperate someone is and to treat all threats accordingly.

Where there is a safe opportunity to de-escalate a threat, it should be attempted. Threats made in the office (in person or on the phone) and threats made in the field to a worker may present an opportunity for de-escalation. See Sections IV and V, pages 9 and 14 respectively. If there is no opportunity for immediate de-escalation, as when a threat is received by mail or through a third party, or if de-escalation doesn't work, threat assessment is the next step. **Threat assessment will be a team process that will always involve Security and the program area.**

If it seems possible that the person actually poses a threat and presents a danger, there must be a plan to move the subject away from violence as an option. This is accomplished by following the steps of threat assessment as described in this section. They are:

- 1. Identification of the person who poses a potential threat**
- 2. Assessment of the risks of violence posed by this person at a given time, and**
- 3. Management of both the individual and the risks that he or she presents to an employee (or employees) in the workplace.**

There are two examples of threat assessments in Attachments A and B. These examples are based on real threats and threat assessments that occurred in this Agency. They are presented to illustrate how a threat assessment would be approached.

1. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PERSON WHO POSES A POTENTIAL THREAT

The first step in threat assessment is to identify the person posing the threat. It is possible that the person will be a stranger to DSS but more than likely we will know the identity of the person. In addition to determining the person's name and his/her relationship to the Agency and/or the specific target, identification means learning as much as possible about the individual in order to both assess and manage risk.

a. **Law Enforcement Check**

Identification will include a **background check by Special Investigations** into whether the person in question has a criminal history. This information is helpful as a tool to assess risk because past violence is the best known predictor of future violence. Also, the presence of a criminal history can help to elicit assistance from the police.

b. **DSS Involvement: What do we know about the person and who else may be at risk?**

The Division must research the individual's involvement with the Agency. What do we know about this individual that can help us to assess and manage the risk (s)he represents? Is there anyone else in this Agency who is currently working with this individual who may also be at risk? Information should be obtained from WMS, case records, etc.

c. **Possession of Weapons**

Identification should always include a search for information, if known, about the possibility of the individual being armed.

d. **Involvement with Other Institutions/Agencies: Information and resource sharing and determining if anyone else outside DSS is at risk**

Threatening situations are more likely to be successfully handled if all available resources are used. This could mean contacting other agencies such as probation or mental health agencies. Identification will also include searching for involvement, ties, or affiliation with other organizations, institutions. Someone in another organization may have knowledge about the individual that could give us information, help us assess and manage risk, or they may have a relationship with the individual that could be helpful. For example, a call to the CAMERA Unit of the Office for Mental Health could be made to enlist the help of the client's case manager, if there is one.

Is anyone in a contract agency or collateral County or State agency possibly at risk? For example: home health aides, day care workers, foster parents, etc. What must be done to notify that other area that may be at risk?

Note for CSEB: In serious cases that involve other counties or states, CSEB, in addition to contacting those entities, must also contact their County Representative from OTDA to advise them of the situation.

2. ASSESSMENT OF THE RISKS OF VIOLENCE

The information gathered in the identification phase will assist in evaluating the risk of violence posed by this person. In addition, it is important to secure detailed descriptions of the individual's

behaviors and actions that prompted other persons to notice the individual. The kinds of information useful for threat assessment include data about overwhelmingly or unbearable stressful experiences and the subject's ability to cope at such times. Has the individual used violence as a means of solving problems in the past? If yes, the chances are high that violence will be used again. Behavioral data about the subject's motives, intentions, and capacities is critical; of particular importance is information about the following behaviors:

- The individual has expressed interest in possible targets, including particular, identifiable targets.
- The individual has communicated with or about potential targets.
- The individual has considered and/or attempted to harm self or others.
- The individual has secured or practiced with weapons.
- The individual has followed or approached potential targets, either with or without weapons, at events or occasions.

3. MANAGEMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE RISKS

The first avenue to explore is the need for involving law enforcement. In addition, management of risks may include the following actions by DSS Security and Supervisors and Managers of other areas:

- A plan to protect all workers on Agency premises.
- A plan to protect targeted individuals on premises, as they leave the premises, and when they are at home.
- A plan for handling the individual upon arrival at a DSS building.
- A plan for conducting Agency business with this individual in such a way as to better ensure the safety of Agency workers. This may mean changing routine operations in a specific case or situation.
- An evaluation of the targeted individual, if there appears to be one. Is the target afraid of the individual posing a threat? Is the target's degree of fear shared by family, friends, and colleagues? How aware or unaware is the targeted employee about the need for caution? How able is the employee to communicate a clear and consistent, "I want no contact with you" message to the person threatening him/her?

In addition to managing a potential problem in the present time, consideration must be given to the possibility of future situations arising with the same individual.

In the two Threat Assessment examples (Attachments A and B), the individuals were assessed to be moving away from carrying out a threat as opposed to moving toward the action. In one instance law enforcement was instrumental in the shift and in the other, the fact that the client's need (housing) was met in other ways shifted the energy away from attack. Future circumstances could arise that propel the individual once again toward an attack. A safety plan should address whether there are supports in place (or that can be developed) that will be available either to the individual or to the target when the individual is again at risk of moving toward violent behavior.

SECTION IX

AFTER A SERIOUS THREAT OR CRITICAL INCIDENT

After a serious threat or an actual act of violence occurs, there are two areas that managers and supervisors must consider to effectively manage the “fall-out” that occurs. One is the issue of trauma that results from a threat or other critical incident. There is a danger that the trauma of an event can severely impact the personnel involved. If a critical incident is unmanaged, 22% of affected individuals will have critical incident stress symptoms six months to one year after the event. This translates into suffering, time lost on the job, resignations, loss of productivity, etc. Steps must be taken to provide a humane, sensitive response to workers to facilitate “the normal recovery of normal people who have been exposed to abnormal events.”

After addressing the workers’ immediate well-being, the other aspect to address is the need to review the incident and the handling of the incident. The goal is to see what can be done to prevent similar instances from occurring in the future. This is a non-judgmental process aimed at improving and facilitating needed supports.

1. DEALING WITH TRAUMA: CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS DEBRIEFING

A Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is a confidential, non-judgmental discussion of the effects of a traumatic incident on workers. The purpose of this group session is to alleviate the trauma of affected workers and assist their recovery process. Debriefing focuses on the emotional well-being of the workers—it does not attempt to find the cause of the incident or assign blame. **A debriefing session would be conducted after the initial shock of an incident has subsided, generally within three days of the incident.**

The Suffolk County Office of Community Mental Health has a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team that consists of professionals specifically trained to run these group sessions. A session is typically 1½–2 hours. Managers should contact Staff Development at 854-9876 or 854-9877 when they perceive a potential need for critical incident debriefing. Staff Development will be the liaison with Community Mental Health professionals.

Persons who may be affected by a critical incident are: the workers directly involved in the incident, the workers in the same unit or even building as the workers directly involved, other witnesses, other workers acquainted with the workers, etc. Also, a critical incident does not necessarily imply one where someone was injured or killed. A situation where someone could have been injured can have the power to cause enough trauma to necessitate a debriefing.

The group session is not therapy or a substitute for therapy. Its main goal is to prevent chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The leaders of the group session will be able to identify and follow-up with individuals who may need to be referred to therapy via the Employees Medical Health Plan.

2. IMPROVING PROCEDURES TO PREVENT FUTURE INCIDENTS: CRITICAL INCIDENT REVIEW

A review of a critical incident should not occur immediately after the event; it should occur within two to four weeks of an occurrence. In this session, managers, supervisors, and workers together review all aspects of the event.

Questions to consider will be:

- a. What were the possible triggers to this event?
- b. Could there have been any way to avoid those triggers?
- c. Could any Agency procedures be changed or modified to prevent future incidents?
- d. Did we inadvertently make ourselves the focus of aggression?
- e. Do we need to put new safety procedures in place as a result of this incident?
- f. Were there communication gaps that need to be addressed?
- g. Once the incident occurred, how well did we respond?
- h. Could we have handled our response better?

It will be important for managers or supervisors conducting a review of a critical incident to keep the tone as positive as possible. The review is an opportunity for learning and improvement. (Any instance of worker conduct that requires administrative action should be handled separate and apart from the review.)

ATTACHMENT A

THREAT ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT: EXAMPLE 1

THREAT SITUATION

An Eligibility Worker began to receive a series of disturbing letters after denying emergency housing to an applicant because of financial ineligibility. The letters continually blamed the worker for the writer's homelessness and contain veiled threats ("People like you should not be allowed to exist," etc.).

Security/SIU brought the letters to the Police who upon investigation determined that no arrest was possible because there was nothing of a criminal nature in the threats.

Nevertheless, the worker felt fear and supervisors, managers, and Security felt that the threat was real enough to take further steps aimed at assessment and management of the risk.

APPROACHES TAKEN

Attempts were made to learn more about the subject (person making the threats).

Law enforcement checks were done by SIU, turning up numerous traffic violations. Had they turned up any history of violence, the case may have been brought back to the police.

The Division checked WMS for DSS case involvement, especially APS.

The Division checked to see if the subject had any connection to the mental health community. If he did, there may have been a case manager to assist the subject with the problem causing him to write the letters in the first place or to determine if the subject was taking his prescribed medications. A case manager may also have known of community or family connections that may have been available to help.

Attempts were made to take the focus off the worker

The Center Manager wrote a letter back to the subject addressing possible alternatives for him to explore.

Attempts were made to protect the worker and all staff in the Center

The Security Guards were given a description of the subject and advised of the situation. The worker was advised to walk to her car at night in the company of fellow workers or Security (when available).

OUTCOME

The subject found other housing on his own and the letters ceased. A plan was put into place in the event the applicant returns to the Center. Future interviews would include a Security standby and supervisory support. A different worker would be assigned to the case.

ATTACHMENT B

THREAT ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT: EXAMPLE 2

THREAT SITUATION

A DSS Home Care nurse received several threatening phone calls from an anonymous source. The caller seemed to be disguising his voice and said he was going to “get” the field worker, she’d seen the end of her days, etc.

APPROACHES TAKEN

Security/SIU and the Division discussed the situation to determine what approaches to take.

- A police report was filed by the worker. The worker believed she knew who the caller was—possibly a family member of patient whose personal care hours she had just reduced.
- SIU obtained permission to put a special trace on the Agency phone where the calls were coming in. If future calls were received, this would enable us to know the phone number being used by the caller.
- The worker was concerned that the caller would come to her home as her phone number and address were listed in the phone book. The Division gave the worker a cellular phone to use in case of emergency. At the request of DSS, the Police agreed to drive past the worker’s house frequently over the weekend.
- A background check was done by SIU on the possible caller and it was found that he had a history of armed robberies with a criminal charge pending. A call was made to the Police to investigate.

OUTCOME

No further threatening calls were made. The field worker took action to obtain an unpublished telephone number. Precautions were taken on future visits to the patient’s home but no further incidents arose.

ATTACHMENT C

IN THE OFFICE: PROTECTIONS / PRECAUTIONS

Staff in DSS offices should be aware of and make use of the following precautions/protections as appropriate and necessary:

1. Security guard standby/also supervisory standby/two interviewers. Workers can request standby directly from Security.
2. Limit the number of people allowed into the interview.
3. Recognize obvious risks and avoid becoming the focus of aggression. Use verbal de-escalation skills.
4. Conduct business over the telephone/through the mail.
5. Clients with Mental Illness: Schedule client for first appointment of the day. Have client wait in a room off lobby that's free of the noise/dissonance in the lobby. Have a client's non-DSS case manager or other responsible, calming influence accompany client to DSS offices.
6. After an incident: staff should not go to their cars at night by themselves; try to leave the building with someone else.
7. Proper seating in interview area (worker should have unblocked access to the door).
8. Sometimes an employee may become aware of active warrants on a client or other circumstances that could lead to an arrest that is unrelated to a client's conduct toward a DSS worker. In these situations, employees are not to arrange for an arrest to take place in DSS buildings. These situations should be brought to the attention of Security.
9. If a specific person has been threatened: evaluate the person's understanding of the risk level.
10. Consider impact of "bad news" on person with violent potential. Security and Reception should not be used to deliver "bad news." Worker or supervisor should deliver bad news with Security stand-by, if necessary. The person who delivers bad news should be someone who can explain why such a decision was reached.
11. Once Security gets directly involved, workers must disperse. All workers should remain away from the area of disturbance until otherwise notified by Security. Where possible, all doors to the area should be closed.
12. If someone from outside the Center comes to Center to take an action that could result in an escalation of tension in the client, Security and the Center Manager must be notified ahead of time. An example would be if CPS comes to the Center to remove a child, Security and the Center Manager should be notified before action is taken.

ATTACHMENT D

DISCRIMINATION AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY STATEMENT

It is the policy of Suffolk County to provide a work environment for its employees free of all types of discrimination and sexual harassment. The prohibition of discrimination and sexual harassment applies to all officers and employees of the County. These acts are unlawful and will not be tolerated under any circumstances. The County has a **zero policy** for such acts and maintains a formal procedure for resolving complaints of discrimination and sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment includes any unwelcomed or offensive sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of an offensive sexual nature, such as uninvited touching or sexual related comments, when: submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a condition of an individual's employment; submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individuals; or when such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. The unwanted behavior may include, but is not limited to, verbal abuse and humiliation, leers, indecent suggestions, and physical touching. Any individual who believes that he or she is being subjected to sexual harassment of any kind by anyone connected with his or her work should report the matter.

Discrimination includes wrongful treatment of persons because of their race, creed, color, sex, marital status, national origin, age, sexual orientation, disability, or military veteran status.

The County of Suffolk strictly forbids any employee from engaging in any of the above-described conduct. Anyone found to have engaged in discrimination or sexual harassment will be subject to disciplinary measures, including termination.

Anyone who believes that he or she is the victim of discrimination or sexual harassment should report the discrimination or harassment to the person selected by his or her Department Head as the "departmental designee" (or where the alleged offender is the Department Head or designee, to the Chief Deputy County Executive/General Counsel), who will conduct, or cause to be conducted, a prompt and thorough confidential investigation of the complaint and take appropriate disciplinary measures against the offending party. All complaints of discrimination or sexual harassment and any information developed during the course of the investigation of these complaints will be kept strictly confidential unless required to be divulged as part of the investigation or pursuant to a legal proceeding. In that case, only those with a need to know will be involved.

There will be no retaliation against any person pursuing his or her rights under the law or this policy.

A copy of the affirmative action policy statement and statements defining discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace has been provided all employees and can be obtained from the Departmental Designee or the Affirmative Action Officer in the County Executive's Office.

ATTACHMENT E

THREATS TO DSS PERSONNEL DESK GUIDE

1. **All threats are to be taken seriously**, and followed through to a logical conclusion that ensures the safety and security of the work environment. This includes threats from the public, other employees, and domestic violence situations involving employees.
 - ❖ See pages 4-5
2. **Threats must be addressed or responded to in some way.** If a worker has received a threat, the appropriate response is either to attempt to defuse the threat or leave and get help. The precise response will vary depending upon many variables, such as the worker's knowledge of and relationship with the client, the nature of the threat, the worker's level of skill in defusing difficult situations, and the worker's gut feeling relative to the level of danger presented. It is important to remember that whenever a worker feels afraid, the best course of action is to get help.
 - ❖ Threats in the office: See pages 5-8 and pages 9-13
 - ❖ Threats in the field: See pages 5-8 and pages 14-15
3. **All threats must be reported to both Security and the Worker's Supervisor.** This refers to verbal threats made in the office or field and threats made over the telephone, by fax, mail, e-mail, or spoken to a third party such as a contract agency.
4. **All threats must be assessed and managed.** The person receiving the threat determines whether to defuse the threat or get help. Less serious threats will be further assessed by the Security Guard and the Worker's Supervisor. More serious threats will be assessed and managed jointly by the Security Supervisor and the Worker's chain of command. Threats that occur in the field will be assessed by the Worker and the Supervisor, with a report to Security. The more serious threats that occur in the field will involve the Security Supervisor and Worker's chain of command.
 - ❖ Supervisors and Managers: See pages 18-20 for assessment and management of more serious threats
5. **The Security Supervisor and the Division (Supervisors and Managers) must review serious threats and critical incidents after the fact.** The goal of critical incident review is to see if processes need improvement to prevent similar incidents in the future.
 - ❖ Supervisors and Managers: See pages 21-22
6. **Supervisors and Managers must explore the need for stress debriefing sessions** if serious threats or a critical incident has caused a worker to experience trauma.
 - ❖ Supervisors and Managers: See pages 21-22

Security Supervisor — Kevin Wilson — 854-9831