

COLLABORTIVE BRIDGES STAFF

SAFETY GUIDELINES

Bridges staff members that are tasked with completing the visit requirements for the Bridge program are potentially subject to a variety of occupational hazards, due to the nature of the environment in which they are exposed to.

Before completing visits with Bridges Participants, it is important to assess the potential risk factors or hazards associated with the home, community, or Participant, if applicable. Bridges staff should be equipped with the knowledge and resources needed to protect themselves while performing mandatory Participant visits in their homes/dwellings.

Regardless of whether there are perceived risks or hazards, Bridges staff members completing visits at the Participant's dwelling should always follow general safety and security guidelines.

- Some Bridges staff may utilize laptops and other equipment intended for use during Participant visits. Due to the increased potential for theft, equipment should be transported in a nondescript bag; ideally a messenger-type bag with a strap over your shoulder. Hold the bag tightly and close to your body, and keep it near your person at all times.
- Remember, personal safety and security is paramount. If someone attempts to steal equipment, let it go! Never fight to keep it.

If you are the victim of theft, immediately call the police to file a formal report, and then follow the Collaborative's Critical Incident reporting procedures.

Appearance/Dress

- Always dress to protect yourself:
 - Wear comfortable shoes and clothes that reflect the area you are visiting and make it easy for you to move quickly.
 - Avoid long skirts or dresses that inhibit movement or create a tripping hazard as well as hats or headwear that obstructs peripheral vision.
 - Wear long sleeves, pants, socks and sturdy shoes such as boots or athletic shoes to protect from animals or insects.
- Refrain from wearing jewelry or carrying a purse. Lock any valuables in the trunk of your car and only take necessary supplies on your person when completing visits.
- Wear a break-away name badge that identifies you as a Bridges staff member and carry a minimal amount of cash.

Vehicle/Travel Safety

- Keep your vehicle in good working order, with a full tank of gas.
- Keep a fully inflated spare tire, tire jack and lug wrench in your vehicle at all times.
- Store a blanket, water and snack in the car for emergencies, year-round.
- Keep your car locked when driving or parked. Keep windows rolled up if possible.
- If you experience car trouble:
 - Remain in the vehicle, turn on the emergency flashers and call the police.
 - If a passerby stops to offer assistance, keep the doors locked and do not leave your vehicle.
 - If you do not have cell phone coverage, ask that the passerby drive to an area where coverage is available and notify the policy of your location and circumstances on your behalf.
 - Never accept a ride from a stranger.
- Plan your trip in advance:
 - Obtain accurate directions and plot out how to enter and exit the area and the safest place to park.
 - Park as close as possible to your destination in a well-lit area and ensure your vehicle is positioned for an easy exit, preferably not in a Participant's driveway.
 - Note surrounding businesses and the nearest police department.
 - Allow plenty of time to drive to the appointment.
- While driving, use of a voice activated GPS system is recommended. However, consider bringing a paper copy of directions as a backup.
- If possible, make home or community visits during day light hours. If scheduling and completing a visit after dark, assess whether lighting is adequate and whether there is evidence of increased activity such as loitering. Avoid hazardous or unlit paths.
- Check the surroundings before exiting the vehicle and keep to main walkways. Never appear lost and walk with a purpose ensuring visibility to your right and left.
- When approaching the vehicle after the visit, be sure to look under the car. Before entering the car, always check the back seat.

Before a Visit

- Contact the Participant or designated contact to reconfirm the visit. Listen for arguments or pets in the background. Ask that pets be adequately restrained prior to your visit.
- Work with a partner in unknown areas, if possible.
- Be alert and observant; develop a sense of consciousness regarding your immediate environment.
- Arrange your work schedule to make visits in new or questionable areas early in the day, when you may be less likely to encounter unsafe activities.
- Review documentation on the Participant prior to the visit including assessments or notes that may identify factors or issues that pose increased risk to personal safety. This should include reviewing any "hazards" notated in SACWIS

- Confirm the address in advance and ensure your supervisor/manager and/or other responsible party knows:
 - Where and when your visit(s) is scheduled.
 - The expected amount of time you'll spend at the visit.
 - How to contact you (your cell phone information).
 - Your vehicle details (year, make/model, and license plate).
- Document the details of each appointment in your work calendar and ensure your manager and coworkers have viewing access.
- Obtain accurate directions to the Participant's dwelling and consult a map before leaving the office. Review directions before making the trip to ensure you are familiar with how to enter/exit the area and where to park. Note businesses, etc., in the surrounding area and identify the nearest police office.
- Obtain a weather report and review road conditions before making a field visit. The local news or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (www.noaa.gov) are good sources for weather-related information in your area. The State Department of Transportation (DOT) will have information pertaining to any current road construction projects.
- If you know you'll be traveling to a remote, isolated or unfamiliar location, check for cell phone coverage in advance. Identify landmarks while traveling and use a Global Positioning System (GPS), if available. Be sure to notify your manager where you are traveling and check in before and after your visit.
- Make your presence known to businesses, property management and security personnel in public housing and other high-rise buildings.
- Ask the Participant to turn on dwelling lighting if needed.
- Allow adequate time to drive to the appointment. Consider having a coworker drop off and/or pick up from the Participant's home.
- Call the office at scheduled times to check in.

Upon Arrival

- Contact Participant to reconfirm the visit.
- Drive around the area of the dwelling looking for:
 - Unsafe conditions like poor lighting, limited visibility (fences, bushes), unsecured animals, people yelling, drinking, fighting, or loitering. Do not exit your vehicle if you feel unsafe.
 - Sources for help like emergency phones (such as on a college campus), neighbors at home, open businesses, other community workers such as police and fire personnel, and/or utility trucks.
- Park your vehicle close to the Participant's dwelling, in a safe, well-lit area. If possible, try to park where you can see your car from inside the home.
- If possible, park on the street, in a spot where you can't be parked in or obstructed. Do not park in the driveway to lessen the chance of being blocked in when you want to leave..

- Park your vehicle in the direction you will be exiting and be wary of dead end streets.
- Before exiting the vehicle, thoroughly check the surroundings (location and activities of people in the area, etc.). If you feel uneasy, do not get out of the car.
- Only take into the visit what you really need. Keep all supplies out of sight and in a nondescript bag.
- Do not walk in deserted places or take shortcuts through vacant blocks, car parks or residential areas. Keep to main walkways that are well lit.
- Avoid walking through crowds of people. If people are loitering on the street or sidewalk, walk around them or across the street, if possible. If you must walk through or near a group of people, be friendly, courteous and walk with a sense of purpose.
- If you are verbally confronted, maintain a professional business manner and do not attempt to answer verbal challenges.
- If you suspect you are being followed, enter the closest public place. If a car is following you while you are on foot, turn around and walk in the opposite direction.
- If you find you have an incorrect address, do not search for the Participant by knocking on strange doors. Call your office to confirm.
- Always knock on the door before entering a Participant's home. Before knocking, listen for anything that may make the situation unsafe. Listen for arguments or unrestrained, potentially aggressive animals. If you hear loud quarreling or fighting or other disturbances, immediately leave the premises, go to a safe place and call the police to request a safety check or 911 in an emergency.
- If you are using an elevator, use an empty one if possible. Always stand next to the door and the control panel and press the appropriate floor number yourself; do not ask someone else to do it. If you have a problem, sound the alarm and push all the buttons so the elevator stops on all floors, providing a better chance of escape. If someone suspicious gets on while you're already in the elevator, get off as soon as possible.
- If you feel unsafe or threatened, upon arrival at a Participant's home, do not enter. Immediately leave the premises, drive to a safe location and phone your supervisor. If urgent, contact the police and/or proceed to the nearest police station.

During a Participant Home Visit

- Pay attention to signs like "No trespassing", "Beware of Dog", etc., as they may be an indicator of the resident's attitudes toward strangers.
- Be cautious when entering a Participant's home.
- If an unfamiliar person opens the door, make sure the Participant is home and you feel safe before entering.
- Ask whether there are other people at home. Be aware of the presence of others.
- If there are pets in the home, note this on your record. Should the pet become a nuisance, ask Participant to put it in another room for the duration of the visit.
- Be aware of the house layout, exit routes, and where the telephone is located.

- Do not go into a dark room, basement, or attic first. Have the Participant go first and turn on the light. Follow; never lead, even if you've been to the dwelling before.
- Keep your keys and cell phone on you.
- Conduct a quick risk assessment upon entering the home:
 - Is the resident coherent?
 - Is there anything different in the resident's demeanor?
 - Is there evidence of alcohol or illegal drug use?
 - Are there any odors such as ammonia or natural gas?
 - Are other people present?
 - Is anyone arguing?
 - Are there any visible weapons?
 - Is the home in disarray or different from usual?
 - Is the resident exhibiting signs of aggression or agitation?
- Never attempt to physically stop violent behavior or get involved in an argument.
- While it is legal to have a firearm in the home, its casual display is inappropriate. Consider pre-advising all Participant of this issue. If you see a firearm, or become aware of one in the room, require the Participant to put the firearm in another room or in a safe, high or locked area during your scheduled visit. If you see that someone is armed or the Participant is uncooperative, immediately leave the premises, drive to a safe location and phone your supervisor. If urgent, contact the police/911 and/or proceed to the nearest police station.
- Cancel the home visit if the Participant is impaired by drugs, alcohol and/or is physically or verbally abusive. Consult with your Supervisor if referrals to appropriate services are needed.
- When sitting, choose a hard chair, if possible, so that you are able to get up quickly.
- If possible, sit so your back is to a solid wall, not to an unknown space.
- Sit as close to an entrance/exit as possible.
- If anything about the visit makes you fear for your personal safety or security, immediately remove yourself from the situation.
- Leave the premises, drive to a safe location and contact your manager.
- If urgent, contact the police and/or proceed to the nearest police department.
- If a medical emergency arises during a home visit, call 911 and wait for emergency medical services.

Dealing with Hostile or Angry Participants

- React and respond to the Participant in a calm but firm manner.
- To help the Participant define their anger, verbally acknowledge it: "I understand that you are upset" or "It sounds like you're angry about this."
- Reinforce the positive long-term benefits of your assistance, your commitment to their best interests, and your role as their ally.
- A lower volume of voice can help the Participant calm down.
- Encourage the Participant to sit down.

- Rehearse ahead of time what you'd say or do in these situations.
- Keep in a mind that an escalated individual may exhibit any of the following:
 - A raised voice;
 - Excessive hand gestures;
 - Fidgeting;
 - Shaking;
 - Rapid speech;
 - Pacing;
 - Excessive sweating;
 - Erratic movements;
 - Aggressive posture; and/or
 - Balled fists.

After a Visit

- Contact your Supervisor or other designated party after each visit.
- Report any incident or significant observations to your Supervisor. Follow the incident reporting procedures immediately or as soon as possible.
- Document ANY incidents, concerns or significant observations in the Participant's notes.

De-Escalation techniques are verbal and non-verbal skills that can be used to prevent a potentially dangerous situation from escalating into a physical confrontation or injury.

Non-Verbal De-Escalation Techniques

As 80-90% of our communication is non-verbal, it is important to adopt a non-threatening body posture.

- Using an open body posture, while maintaining a strong base with feet shoulder width apart. Positioning yourself at a 45 degree angle to another person is often perceived as less threatening.
- Maintaining at least a handshake's distance away to allow the person adequate personal space. Remember, the amount of space required for a person differs based on gender, familiarity, culture, and mood.
- Reducing direct eye contact by looking at the more general area of the person's face that includes the eyes-to-shoulders, rather than looking just at the eyes. Allow the person to break his/her gaze and look away.
- Being aware that it is easier for an upset person to physically escalate if you have your back to them. Avoid sudden movements that may startle or be perceived as an attack.
- If possible, attempt to casually position yourself behind a barrier such as a sofa, counter or other large object. Position yourself closer to the room entrance than the person. Always be at the same eye level. Encourage the person to be seated, but if he/she needs to stand, stand up also. If possible, select a hard chair or surface to sit on.

- Using a calm but firm voice. Relax your facial muscles and appear open and confident. Always have an exit plan.

Verbal De-Escalation Techniques

Verbal techniques include communication strategies to respond to or redirect escalating behavior.

- Giving the person your physical and mental attention. Engage in the conversation using non-intrusive gestures such as nodding your head, saying okay, or asking an occasional question. Allow time for reflection and silence to process information and emotion.
- To help the person define their feelings, verbally acknowledging them. Use responses such as “I understand that you are upset” or “It sounds like you're angry about this.”
- Avoiding being defensive or judgmental even if comments or insults are directed at you. Resist the urge to defend yourself or anyone else from insults, curses, or misconceptions about their roles or behaviors. Do not try to argue or convince; instead give choices (i.e. empower).
- Putting yourself on the person’s side of finding a solution to the problem (e.g. “I want to help you” or “Please tell me more so I can better understand how to help you.”)
- Suggesting alternative behaviors or offer a distraction where appropriate (e.g. “Would you like to take a break and have a cup of coffee or some water?”)
- Being honest. Lying to a person to calm them down may lead to future escalation if they become aware of the dishonesty. However, do not volunteer information which may further upset the Participant.
- Reinforcing the positive long-term benefits of your assistance, your commitment to their best interests, and your role as their ally.
- Being very respectful even when firmly setting limits or calling for help. The agitated individual is very sensitive to feeling shamed and disrespected. We want him/her to know that it is not necessary to show us that they should be respected. We automatically treat them and all Participants with dignity and respect.