

## **MSU Extension's Safety Initiative**

Staff safety is important to MSU Extension. Occasionally, staff may face situations that are potentially dangerous. The MSU Extension Safety Initiative is intended to promote the safety of employees who conduct home visits as a part of their jobs.

The MSU Extension Safety Initiative focuses on two areas:

- Staff training
- Providing rules/recommendations for Extension staff who conduct home visits and their supervisors

Training component:

All employees who conduct home visits as a part of their jobs are expected to attend:

- New Staff Orientation, which includes a session by an officer from the MSU Dept. of Public Safety or a session with an officer in their community who has been familiarized with MSU Extension's programs and the issues related to safety
- Crisis Prevention Institute (or equivalent training) on "Dealing with Angry and Frustrated People." Training sessions are offered at different locations in the state through the Family and Consumer Sciences program area.

Local trainings:

MSUE suggests that counties provide the following training for their staff that conduct home visits and their supervisors:

- Safety discussions as a regular part of staff meetings
- Annual review with MSU Extension's Safety Initiative staff
- An annual discussion/training with a local police officer
- An annual discussion/training with a local healthcare provider to discuss issues related to infectious diseases, hazardous materials and other environmental contaminants (i.e. molds, airborne toxins).

Recommendations:

Each county should review the enclosed MSU Extension Safety Initiative document. All staff with home visitation responsibilities should follow the required practices. The recommended practices are suggestions and may be modified according to county needs. All appropriate staff should receive a copy of your county version of this safety initiative. The county version should be reviewed and adopted as standard practice.

Each county should develop a list of emergency phone numbers and distribute it to staff. The list should include phone numbers for the police department, fire department, supervisor's home, county Extension director's home, wrecker services and other staff phone numbers as appropriate.

## MSU Extension Safety Initiative For Employees who Conduct Home Visits

Teaching in community settings like homes and churches has benefits and challenges including an increased concern for your safety. MSU Extension has had very few incidents that have caused harm to its staff members, but staff members are sometimes present in potentially risky situations. Taking precautions is important to minimize possible danger. The recommendations in this document can help you. Make these practices second nature.

Participants can help by watching for you, being at the door or outside to greet you and watching you leave. There may be situations where making a home visit or group presentation alone is not prudent. You might explore making the visit with a colleague from your program or from another agency. Or you may be able to meet at a different location – e.g. fast food restaurant, a school, a library or another agency.

### **Required Practices**

Threats/Assaults/Accidents  
Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting

#### **A. Threats/Assaults/Accidents**

1. Any time you feel uneasy about your safety with a participant, immediately report it to your supervisor. You and the supervisor should jointly inform the county Extension director to decide what action to take. The action may include arrangements for another worker to accompany you on visits, arranging for the participant to come to the office or terminating the visits.
2. Threats, assaults or accidents must be immediately reported to the supervisor. An incident report will be completed for all injuries either accidental or caused by the participant, including attacks by dogs, burns, falls and others.
3. If you find yourself in a dangerous situation, immediately leave or defend yourself in a reasonable manner with the intent to escape and seek safety.
4. The use or carrying of weapons is prohibited. Small knives used only for food preparation are not considered weapons in this case.

*If you feel uneasy about a situation, look at your watch and say something like, “It’s later than I thought. My supervisor is expecting me. I’ll call/contact you soon.”*

#### **B. Abuse and Neglect Reporting**

Reporting suspected child abuse or neglect is a serious issue. It is important that MSU Extension program associates, supervisors and county Extension directors are aware of laws about reporting suspected child abuse or neglect and understand their roles as MSUE educators.

Michigan’s Child Protection Law states that some individuals, including teachers, are required to report if there is “reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect.” Although program associates educate the public, they are not considered teachers under this law. Regardless of the existence or absence of a legal obligation, MSU Extension has decided to address suspected child abuse and neglect because of moral and ethical reasons.

If you suspect child abuse or neglect, you should discuss the situation with your Extension educator or other supervisor within 24 hours of the observation. If it is determined that there is reasonable cause to suspect child abuse, your Extension educator/supervisor may file a report with the Department of Human Services within 72 hours of the observation. If for some reason your supervising educator is not available, report the incident to your county Extension director, who can assume the role of the Extension educator in the interim.

You may be called to testify in a child abuse or neglect trial. Your Extension educator/supervisor should support you every step of the process and be present at all court hearings. You can only testify to behaviors you have witnessed, not your interpretation or judgment of what may have happened.

If you suspect spousal or abusive behavior between adults, discuss the situation with your supervisor. You and your supervisor need to decide together if it is safe for you to continue visits in the home and what other action(s) need to be taken.

### **Recommended Practices**

- Prepare for a Home Visit
- Prepare Your Vehicle
- Plan Your Route
- Making a Home Visit
- Information Kept in Files
- Transporting Individuals

### **C. Prepare for a Home Visit**

1. Before the visit, check with the referring agency person to see if there are any safety issues in the home. You may want to include this as a question on any forms used to take referral information from other agencies.
2. Make contact with the family by telephone and/or letter.
  - a. Telephone or send a letter explaining who you are and why you are coming to visit.
  - b. Tell them when you'll be there and encourage them to write it down (e.g. on a calendar used to keep track of appointments). Scheduling visits during work hours is required unless your supervisor has given prior approval.
  - c. Tell them the color, model and make of the car you will be driving so they can be watching for you.
  - d. Ask questions about the best way to get there if you are unsure.
  - e. Make sure the family has your telephone number so that they can call you if there is a change in plans.
  - f. Ask about any animals that may be a threat to you.
3. Dress appropriately and carry as little as possible.
  - a. Wear your MSU Extension or county name badge and carry business cards to identify yourself.
  - b. Dress comfortably and avoid wearing or carrying valuable items, such as jewelry, furs, purse, camera, etc. If you carry a beeper or cell phone, conceal it.

- c. Wear good walking/running shoes.
  - d. Keep your purse locked in your car out of sight. (Do this at all times - before you get to the visit, or better yet – don't use a purse.) Keep your driver's license, registration, insurance card and a small amount of money in your pocket (Your "fanny pack" is good).
  - e. Put extra things (i.e. equipment, toys, books) in a canvas bag so they are not conspicuous. If possible, put them in your trunk.
  - f. Carry materials in a way that keeps your hands free, in a tote bag, for example.
4. Leave information at your office.
- a. Leave a copy of your home visit schedule at the office, containing appointment times, names, addresses and telephone numbers.
  - b. Home visits must be scheduled during work hours. No "after hour" (or weekend) visits can be made unless prior approval has been obtained from your supervisor.
  - c. Carry a list of staff phone numbers to use in case of emergencies when working after normal business hours (i.e. supervisor's home phone number, county Extension director's home phone number).
  - d. If your schedule changes during the day, inform your office.
  - e. It is suggested that you periodically call the office throughout the day even if your schedule has not changed.
  - f. You must report in person or by phone at the beginning and end of the workday.
  - g. If you are returning after work hours, contact your supervisor at home.
  - h. If you have not contacted your supervisor by the expected time or the end of the workday, your supervisor will attempt to locate you. If you can't be reached, the county Extension director will be informed and the authorities will be notified.
5. Cellular phones
- a. You should consider taking a cellular phone on home visits for use in emergencies and for contacting the office.
  - b. All office-owned cellular phones should be programmed to rapidly dial 911, the police department and the MSU Extension office.
  - c. It is suggested that the county provide prepaid calling cards for staff to use.

#### D. Prepare Your Vehicle

1. Keep the gas tank at least half full; do not stop for gas in unsafe areas.
2. Keep your car in good running condition.
3. Make certain the doors and windows lock. Don't drive a car that has doors that won't lock or windows that don't work.
4. Lock your car at all times – while it's parked and while you're driving.
5. Make sure your horn works.
6. Keep the registration with you; don't leave it in your car or at least have a copy of the registration at home.
7. Have the knowledge and equipment to change a tire.
8. Have two sets of keys stored in separate locations, including one in reserve for emergencies.

#### E. Plan Your Route

1. Use a map to plan a route for getting to and from the home. (Use major streets, if possible.)
2. Carry a detailed map of your area in the car.
3. Locate the nearest police precinct (not mini-substation) and write down that precinct telephone number.

#### F. Making a Home Visit

1. Before leaving, call the family to remind them you are coming, if possible.
2. Carry the referral form/card with you so you can refer to it, if needed.
3. Drive to the family's home.
  - a. Allow time to assess the neighborhood, especially if this is your first visit.
  - b. Drive around the neighborhood, identifying key locations:
    - i. Major businesses/stores
    - ii. Safe rest rooms
    - iii. A telephone you could use in an emergency (not a telephone booth)
  - c. Circle the block where the home is located to get a sense of where you are.
  - d. Locate a safe place to park: one that is open; near a light source; in the direction you want to go when leaving; and is on the street, not in a driveway.
  - e. Back into the parking space so you can leave in a hurry if you need to.
  - f. Avoid a space where you might get blocked in.
  - g. Check out the immediate area before getting out of the car.
  - h. Take an already written note with you as you leave your car – to leave on the door if the family is not at home.
4. Lock your car.
  - a. Lock all doors when leaving your car, even if you have a second load to carry.
  - b. Leave your purse hidden in your locked car at all times.
  - c. Avoid leaving other visible valuables in your car (e.g. coins, keys, bags).  
Place items in the trunk.
5. Walk to the home with a confident manner. If at anytime you feel threatened, leave and reschedule the visit.
  - a. Limit the amount of materials you take in the home. Use a shoulder or tote bag to carry them so that you are empty-handed.
  - b. Be alert to your surroundings at all times.
  - c. Avoid loiterers, dark alleyways and bars. Walk in the middle of the sidewalk.
  - d. If a group is congregating close to your participant's home, try to assess the situation and risk. If you feel uneasy, try calling to see if he/she can come out to meet you, or leave and call to reschedule the visit.
  - e. If you are verbally confronted, maintain a professional manner. Don't attempt verbal challenges. Leave immediately.
  - f. Pause before knocking and listen. If you hear loud quarreling or another disturbance, leave immediately.
  - g. After knocking on the door or ringing the bell, move off to the side in case you receive a violent greeting.
  - h. If the front door is open and someone calls, "Come in," wait until that person comes to the door. There may be dogs or some other reason to avoid entering

at that moment. When someone comes to the door, greet him or her in a friendly manner and identify yourself. If you sense danger, be prepared to leave quickly.

- i. Do not enter a home unless an adult is present. If a child answers the door, tell the child to go get his/her parent. If there is not an adult caregiver in the home, report this to your supervisor and together decide if this incident needs to be reported.
  - j. If no one is home, leave a prewritten note on the door. Do not stand around writing a note.
  - k. Trust your instincts. If you feel threatened or uncomfortable with the situation, (i.e. the participant is becoming upset, threatening or angry) make other arrangements for contact such as an office visit or a public location.
  - l. Any time you feel uneasy about a participant, discuss it with your supervisor.
  - m. When entering a home, be aware of the location of exits, other rooms, other people in the home, etc. Conduct your visit in a room accessible to an exit and place yourself closest to that exit.
  - n. If you feel uneasy about other people in the home, ask the participant if he/she wishes to reschedule the visit.
6. Enter and find a place to work.
- a. Select a spot where your back is not toward the door or a window. This is to help avoid surprises. Avoid working in a backroom or other place where you could get trapped.
  - b. Assess the situation. Look for means of quick escape should potentially dangerous activities such as drug use or an escalating conflict occur.
7. Guard against illness/infectious diseases.
- a. Wash your hands between participant visits.
  - b. Avoid using participant's towels and dishcloths.
  - c. If you become aware that someone in the house has an infectious disease, such as tuberculosis, report it to your supervisor.
  - d. Do not touch any blood, urine, vomit or stool from participants or their children.
  - e. Cover open wounds or broken skin with a bandage.
  - f. Select a hard, smooth chair, if possible, which is unlikely to have hidden spills, bugs or other things on it.
8. Be alert to strange noises.
- a. Ask the family to turn off the television while you work together.
  - b. If you hear noises or voices, ask who or what it is. Make it a point to know who are members of the family, who are friends, etc.
9. Leave cautiously.
- a. When leaving the home visit, have your keys in your hand.
  - b. Be alert as you leave. Walk purposefully to your car, checking inside and under your car before entering.
  - c. If someone is leaning on your car or tampering with it, return to the home and call for help, if needed.
  - d. Lock your car as soon as you get in.
  - e. Consider asking the family to walk you to your car, if you feel uneasy.

- f. Check for small children under and around your car.
- g. Drive away immediately. If you need to write notes about the visit, do it later.

#### G. Suspicious Signs of Drugs

If you have any reason to suspect drugs use, leave immediately. Such signs might include:

- Many people are walking in and out of the house without knocking.
- Cars are being waved to through a window while you are inside (postponing a drug deal?).
- Drugs are being used or sold, or alcohol is being consumed in the home.
- Report suspected drug use and your reasons for such suspicions to your supervisor.

#### H. Information Kept in Files

Participant files should only contain information related to the teaching and education you are providing them. It should not contain thoughts or ideas you have concerning that family and their situation. MSU Extension staff members are not trained as social workers, so recording information related to other life situations is not recommended.

#### I. Transporting Individuals

1. Transporting participants in your own car is discouraged. It can put you at risk. Call 911 if an emergency occurs and transportation is needed. Check with your supervisor to clarify your county policy regarding transport.
2. Check with your supervisor to find out if there is a county-owned vehicle available for use by MSU Extension and discuss the county policy regarding using a county-owned vehicle to transport individuals for program-related events. Seatbelts and appropriate child safety seats would need to be used. The county Extension director must be informed of the intended use of the vehicle and authorize its use.

Updated by MSUE FCS  
April 2005  
adopted by MSUE administrative team  
April 2005