Home Visit Safety Guidance

The intent of the required home visits of teen parents/participants in the ELECT program is to assess the home life and well being of the participant and child. The home visit is also service delivery to update other person(s), family, whom are residing with the teen parent regarding the ELECT program requirements and outcomes and any obstacles that the teen parent might have in not meeting their personal goals. ELECT staff is required to complete the initial home visit of the teen parent once enrolled in the ELECT program. Home visits of the ELECT participants are to be conducted every three months. Coordination with other qualified service agencies conducting home visits can be obtained and noted in the ELECT participant’s case file.

Staff, including supervisors should spend a percentage of their time preparing for home visits and learning about their destination. Staff should review individual case files and ask questions about pets, other house hold members, and the general street/neighborhood prior to a visit. Attaining this information during intake should be mandatory for any program requiring home visits. It is recommended that a standalone case note/summary reflecting this information be displayed on the inside file jacket or separate tab for quick reference. It should be updated after each visit to ensure ever-changing home conditions are described and relevant.

Generally speaking, clients should always be informed and reminded of intended visits prior to the visit. Clients should know how many people will visit, who from the home is expected to be in attendance and employee protocols during visits. For Example, clients should be informed if employees are required to call the office upon their arrival and/or departure. This communication with the client can be done in person, via phone and with a follow up letter.

Resources permitting, it is recommended that agencies identify any individual(s) responsible to monitor home visits. At a minimum, this individual will track the departure of the employee conducting the home visit to the home, the visit, and departure from the home. They serve as a primary contact (other than police) should an employee need help. This individual should have immediate access to the name, basic description/picture, home and cell phone number of the employee and that of an emergency contact, employee home visit schedule that include names, addresses and telephone numbers, and the make, model, color and car registration number. If staff travels by public transportation, it is important to have basic information on bus routes used.

In addition, the steps below may prove helpful in establishing protocols for agencies and their staff. There are no full-proof procedures that ensure full safety for any employee. These steps provide guidance to minimize precarious conditions.

**Before the Home Visit**

Visibly post home visit schedules at the office. Ideally, site supervisors review and discuss schedules during daily/weekly check-in sessions with staff. ANY and ALL changes to agreed-upon schedules should be discussed with the established contact person/supervisor. Staff should never assume that writing it on the board or leaving a note is sufficient notification.

Ensure at least two individuals (professional and personal if visits occur after hours) are aware of home visiting schedules including departure times, expected length of visit, and check in time. Having agreed upon methods and check-in times is critical to staff’s safety. Institute a clear response plan for staff that do not check in at expected times.

If possible, it is recommended that two staff attend the first home visit together and depending on safety levels, return as a pair if warranted.

Provide or compensate for the use of cell phones. Ensure cell phones are pre-programmed with emergency contact and back up phone numbers. Cell phones should be fully charged, set to vibrate, and kept on during visits.
Establish a code word/number that can be used to indicate a threat or emergency situation. For example, texting the word "red" to the primary contact person or making a call and asking "did I leave my "red" sweater at the office?" will signal that the staff person is in need of help. Keep the word short and common for easy use.

Request that family members restrain animals (placed outdoors/basement/behind locked doors) PRIOR to home visits.

Make sure vehicles have a full tank of gas, emergency supplies, maps, and that the vehicles are in good working condition.

Staff should limit valuables, money, credit/ATM cards and jewelry on their person when visiting homes.

Put away all valuables BEFORE arriving to destinations. Placing items in trunks, underneath seats, or other compartments should occur before arriving to desired destination thus minimizing attention to staff and their vehicle.

Staff should prepare necessary materials for the visit in advance.

Without being obvious, staff should be aware of their audience when they arrive at their destination.

Staff should learn as much about the neighborhood activities as possible. For example, schedule visits in the morning if known drug trafficking/usage occurs mostly in the evenings.

Staff should memorize the location of the nearest police, fire or other public facility they may go to for help in the event of an emergency.

**Arriving at the Home/Destination**

Staff should wear agency identification badge at all times.

It is helpful if staff maintain appropriate appearance and grooming in order to project an image of professionalism. If wearing jewelry is a preference, staff should keep it to a minimum. Staff should wear comfortable clothing and shoes that allow them to move effortlessly if necessary. Accessories such as necklaces and scarves should be avoided.

Staff should lock their vehicle before, during and after their visit. A quick check inside and under their car should be conducted before entering their vehicle. Staff are strongly encouraged to carry vehicle keys in their hand for accessibility as well as a means of protection.

Staff should park their vehicle in manner that allows for an easy and quick getaway. They should not park in a driveway where they may get blocked in, or they should reverse park which allows them to easily drive away. If they park in a cul de sac, they should consider parking in the direction of the cul de sac exit.

Staff are encouraged to always carry their cell phone or car keys on their person and NEVER in their handbag or briefcase.

It is strongly recommended that staff keep the address of their location on a small piece of paper and in their pocket/other concealed area in case they have to call the police and give them their whereabouts.

Carrying a noise making device such as a whistle and keeping it concealed and on their person is a good idea.
Staff is encouraged to only enter a home after an adult gives them permission to do so. Before entering however, it should be established that the intended recipients of the visit are home.

If visible signs or suspicions of weapons, illicit drugs, or alcohol are present, the home visit should not be made. Staff should immediately call their primary contact person and explain why the visit is not being made. Staff should immediately follow up with their supervisor to ensure the incident is well documented in case notes/incident reports, and to determine alternate home visit scenario.

Staff should never enter a house if there is yelling, screaming, and breaking glass etc coming from within. They should leave immediately and call the police/follow company’s policy.

**During Home Visits**

Once inside the home, and without being obvious, staff should take time to note all possible exits and bathrooms. In the event of an altercation, staff can barricade themselves in the bathroom and call the police.

Staff should observe how the front door is locked upon entering. In cases where a deadbolt exists, ask the client to leave the key in the lock.

Pay attention to overall home conditions…particularly steps, loose carpeting, loose floor boards, and cords. These can cause tripping during a hasty departure. Electrical hazards are equally debilitating. Refrain from using client’s electrical equipment.

Stay out of rooms such as kitchens. They contain a variety of items that can be used as weapons.

Staff should be mindful of their personal behavior especially if domestic violence or child abuse is suspected. Employee behavior, facial expressions, and mannerisms, etc. can unintentionally trigger a response in another person that could not be predicted. Staff should be trained in de-escalating techniques and/or leave immediately.

Consider the tips below if a home visit becomes unsafe.

At the first sign of a threat, staff must try to remain as calm as possible. Under no circumstances should staff retort.

If possible, staff should immediately leave the premises.

If unable to do so, staff should (slowly) move to a room with a lock such as a bathroom and call the police. Again, staff should keep their cell phone and the address of their location on a small piece of paper on their person.

Staff should try not to walk backwards since they are unfamiliar with home items and risk tripping during escape.

If staff is unable to move to a safer location, they should try to keep a barrier such as a table between themselves and their aggressor.

If staff do speak, they should do so slowly and calmly. They should take deep breaths and not say anything to further antagonize their aggressor. They should never threaten their aggressor.

Once safe, staff should immediately call the police and provide all the details of the occurrence. Include any observations of weapons.
After the Home Visit

If a check-in procedure exists, staff should call their primary contact when safely in their vehicle or other mode of transportation.

It is recommended that case notes be written with 24 hours of the home visit to ensure accurate portrayal of all interactions.

In cases where staff safety was compromised, a full incident report should be recorded. All agency leadership should be made aware of the incident including Human Resource departments.

Ongoing visits to a home where an incident occurred should be fully discussed in advance by agency leadership and the maximum level of caution should be exercised if recurring visits are warranted.

Arrangements should be made for employees traumatized by any negative incidents that occur to them while performing work duties.

Home Visits Incidents

If an incident has occurred during a home visit, documentation must be made and discussed with program officials. If future home visits to this participant have been deemed to be suspended, documentation must be noted in the participant’s case file. This documentation must contain:

1) Description of the incident along with the name(s) of all present during the home visit.
2) Documentation of meetings, phone conversations, and discussions regarding the decision to suspend home visits to this participant. This documentation should also contain notification to any other organizations that the program partners with regarding home visits.
3) Documentation of follow-up actions to be completed regarding the safety of the teen parent and child must be included in the case file.
4) Documentation of steps to be taken to resume home visits.
5) If the area in which the participant lives has been deemed hazardous due to local crime by the police department, a notation in the participant’s case file must be noted.

Home visit incidents or the suspension of home visits within a geographic area of the ELECT program must be reported to the ELECT State Coordinator, PA Department of Education.