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The Power of Collaboration: Developing a Safety Training Program for Student Interns

Joan Ferry DiGiulio

ABSTRACT

Students in field-based learning experiences are generally not prepared to deal with assaultive client behavior. Moreover, the incidence of violence against professional social workers and social work students continues to increase. There is a growing concern in the university community for the safety of social work field students as well as student interns from other disciplines. This article reviews collaborative efforts among university departments that offer internship programs. A university-wide committee that addressed safety issues for student interns was formed. Available resources within the university were explored and components of a safety training program were established. Possible program models were also developed.

Workplace violence, a growing occurrence nationwide (Bachman, 1994), has been known to affect the lives of social work field students. Those students often serve their practicums in social agencies that are over-represented with clients that are hostile, attacking, have poor judgement and a lack of impulse control (Schultz, 1987). Exposure to this volatile and unpredictable client group increases probability of students experiencing workplace violence, making social work a dangerous profession (Newhill, 1995).

Social work students entering their field experiences are generally not prepared to deal with assaultive client behavior (Griffin, 1995). A study by Ellison (1996) documents that field students are subjected to verbal assaults, physical violence, and sexually suggestive language. Universities and social work programs have a responsibility to acknowledge potential risks associated with field education and to minimize those risks by providing knowledge and preparation in safety procedures. This training can mitigate potential safety risks and serve to

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Document precautions taken by the university in the event of a lawsuit where the university would be held liable for injuries incurred by a field student.

**Review of Literature**

Articles published on the incidence of violence against professional social workers attest to the seriousness of the problem. Schultz's (1987) study reported on 83 social workers who experienced physical violence, verbal threats, property damage and destruction of property. He recommended in-service training and organizational safeguards to combat this phenomenon. Newhill (1995) illustrated lesser forms of client violence through the use of case vignettes describing verbal threats, intimidation, and physical assault. A survey of 175 licensed social workers and 98 agency directors in a western state showed that 23% of social workers had been physically assaulted by a client, nearly 50% had witnessed violence in an agency, and 82% were fearful of client violence (Rey, 1996). In response to the early 1990s murders of 8 child welfare workers nationwide and the assaults of another 25 urban New Jersey workers, Scala (1995) developed a nine-point plan for improved health and safety measures for social workers. One of the components of that plan is a requirement that all new direct-care workers complete one half-day of safety training conducted by a police officer. This training aimed to teach social workers how to recognize, avoid, defuse, and deescalate potentially violent situations. A survey of Montana child welfare workers indicated that threats and violence directed against the workers were a fairly common occurrence (Horejsi, Gartwiat, & Rolando, 1994).

Similiar episodes of violence against social work field students are recorded. A study of 121 social work students at the University of Georgia found that 26% of the students surveyed experienced some type of violence as part of their practicum (Tully, Kropf, & Price, 1993). Wayne and Raskin (1996) reported that 10 of 22 field directors interviewed knew of students who were victims of field-related crimes. Ellison's (1996) survey of social work programs showed that in 147 responding programs, 23 schools reported incidents of violence. In the 23 programs reporting incidents of violence, a total of 77 students experienced some form of violence while in their field placements. This included verbal, physical, and sexual assaults, as well as observing assaults. Sexual harassment, a discriminatory practice that creates a hostile working environment, may also be considered as a form of workplace violence. A recent study of sexual harassment of field placement students disclosed 37 incidents of sexual harassment at 20 social work programs during a two-year period. Perpetrators of sexual harassment included agency staff members, agency field instructors, faculty field liaison, faculty field seminar instructors, and others (Fogel & Ellison, 1998).

Despite the growing incidence of violence toward social workers, the majority of students entering field placements have inadequate or no training to deal with this issue (Griffin, 1995; Grossman, 1990). Tully, Kropf, and Price (1993) found that only 26% of the 121 students surveyed reported that they received safety training at their field sites. In the same study, 54% of students communicated that safety issues had been discussed in their social work courses, and 35% stated that their faculty liaison discussed safety issues with them. Di Giulio's (1997) survey of 35 field agencies reported that students received field agency safety training if it was provided at the time the students were in placement. However, training sessions were generally offered only once a year and ran the gamut from showing a film on home visit safety, listening to a talk by a local police officer, having the field instructor mention safety tips, to more extensive programs, such as one-day workshops conducted by staff professionally trained in safety procedures.

Safety issues in field-based learning experiences are not unique to social work programs. Internships offered by other university departments, such as nursing, criminal justice and psychology, have similar concerns regarding student safety. With this in mind, university administrators should examine this topic and develop a university-wide safety training program for all field students. A study of one university's efforts to bring about a comprehensive safety training program will be reviewed.

**Formation of a Committee**

Due to a growing concern about potential violence in field placements and a recognition of uneven and inadequate safety training, the chairperson of the social work program at a midwestern, urban university called a meeting of university chairpersons and internship coordinators in programs offering field-based learning experiences. This social work chairperson was alarmed because a social work field student was choked by a violent, chronically mentally ill client the previous year. Although this student managed to break loose by using self defense techniques learned in a university physical education class, the incident was poorly handled, without any debriefing procedures, leaving the student with guilt and self-blame.

The obvious benefits of collaboration between programs and departments include sharing of information, determining similar concerns, and pooling expertise. Because of scarce monetary resources, collaboration was also viewed as a cost-saving measure that focused on university-wide safety issues in field-based education, rather than duplicate efforts by having each department develop a safety program independently.

Representatives of field-based programs attended the initial committee meeting. They were enthusiastic about the prospect of networking with programs that
had similar matters of interest. Discussion revealed the following concerns: the Department of Health Professions was worried about safety for their emergency medical technology students, who frequently were called to handle mentally ill and physically violent clients. This same department expressed home-visit safety concerns for their respiratory care students who provided home health care. The School of Education acknowledged that student teachers were subjected to verbal and physical assaults and faculty were alarmed at the rising incidence of children taking guns to the classroom. Criminal Justice faculty considered their student interns as practicing in high risk environments of prisons and crime-ridden neighborhoods. Hospitality Management students were subjected to workplace violence committed by irate customers. Faculty in Psychology, Nursing, Counseling, and Sociology had field-based concerns similar to Social Work faculty members. Those included fears that students would be physically attacked by irrational clients and be targeted as crime victims in unsafe neighborhoods. Representatives from the Business and Engineering Schools were troubled by industrial accidents, such as heavy objects falling on students. Sexual harassment and exploitation of student interns, in the form of carrying out errands for the boss, were mentioned as problematic for business student interns.

None of the departments in attendance had formalized safety training programs. At best, safety issues were mentioned briefly in practice classes. Committee members proceeded to name themselves the Safety for Student Interns Committee, and agreed to furnish collaboration.

As a next step, committee members decided to gather additional information and possible support from university resources. Resources targeted were the university's risk manager, legal office, campus police department, and the office of the provost.

**University Resources**

The risk manager related that the only insurance coverage for student interns was for malpractice. This would apply when clients sued student interns for professional malpractice and when students defended themselves against assaulting clients and the clients were injured in the process. Because the university does not carry medical coverage for student interns, it was strongly suggested, but not required, that students carry their own medical coverage in the event they are injured. Social work students were also encouraged to carry NASW liability insurance for any possible malpractice lawsuits.

According to the office of the general counsel, the university is liable for selection of field sites and this includes students being offered proper protection and receiving safety precautions. It is important for the university to show good faith, which can be realized by screening field sites, providing safety training and having a written safety policy for each department that provides field-based learning, as well as for the university as a whole.

Periodically, the campus police department offers crime prevention programs. Three of their programs supply relevant information on safety issues, especially when home visits were used. A workshop on personal protection included tips on acting assertively, dressing inconspicuously and using objects such as keys, shoes, fingernails, handbags and pens or pencils as weapons for self protection. A car safety workshop discussed becoming aware of one's surroundings, keeping the car doors locked and windows closed, maintaining a distance between cars, placing valuables in the trunk and carrying a cellular phone. Campus police also presented a defending against rape course, which was apropos for field students.

The office of the provost supported committee efforts and appointed an assistant provost to serve as a liaison between the committee and the administration. This representative also attended committee meetings.

**Components of a Safety Training Program**

Committee members formulated a list of topics that should be covered in a safety training program. Those subjects relevant for social work students were: prediction of possible client violence; office safety; home visit safety; assessment and intervention; verbal intervention and deescalation; physical techniques for self protection; and debriefing and support after an incident.

Factors that might lead a client to act violently were discussed. Those included one or several of the following: a meager tolerance for anxiety or tension; a propensity to act rather than think; and limited, superficial, or highly ambivalent relations with significant others. Additional trigger factors mentioned for students to consider were client fear, panic, anger, jealousy, confusion, agitation, disorientation, loss of power, rebellion against authority, hallucinations, and being under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Students should also be aware that clients with a history of substance abuse, weapon possession, and violent behavior have a higher probability of being violent in the future (Newhill, 1996). Other predictors of violence that students should note are a diagnosis of psychosis, antisocial personality disorder, or head trauma (Rey, 1996).

Workplace safety precautions were reviewed by the committee. Safety features discussed were clearly defined waiting areas; work areas separated by locked doors; adequate internal and external lighting; interview rooms that were not isolated; and the use of alarm systems and security guards if necessary (Griffin, 1995). It was recognized that most field students and university programs were not part of the decision-making process with regard to overall workplace safety. However, students could learn how to arrange any work space available to them to maximize their safety. That could be accomplished by placement of furniture
so the student is closest to the door, eliminating excessive furniture and items that could be used as weapons, such as paperweights and letter openers, and adding cushions that could be used as shields.

The committee recognized risks involved in home visitation. They agreed that field students need to possess knowledge of the environment they are entering and learn appropriate safety procedures. Students should research their destination, check out the neighborhood before parking and getting out of their car, park in an area close to the residence, make note of all exits in the home, and stay near a door. When in their car, field students need to keep doors locked and windows up, park where they cannot be blocked in, and lock their car when leaving.

Committee members noted that field students needed to continually assess their situation prior to and while engaging in verbal and physical interventions. Students must be able to implement skills that serve to decrease the escalation of violence and must know when deescalation is not possible and how to escape when this is warranted. When a client becomes increasingly agitated, loses rationality, and increases physical acting out, the student should make personal safety a priority concern.

Student knowledge of deescalation techniques was considered essential. Nonverbal and verbal deescalation is based on the premise of respect for clients and a willingness to listen to their concerns and to take them seriously. Field students should be taught to not invade a client’s personal space because that can escalate client anxiety. It is important for students to recognize the specific amount of space each client needs in order to be comfortable. Client personal style and cultural influences should be taken into consideration. Standing off to the side at an angle and one client leg length away is also desirable. Agitated clients should not be touched without their permission. Other verbal interventions include: listening carefully to what the client is saying; acknowledging the client’s anger and feelings; being noncritical, nonblaming and nondefensive; apologizing if appropriate; and keeping the pitch and volume of one’s voice at optimal level for effective communication.

Physical control interventions might need to be employed if the field student is hit, kicked, held, choked, bit, or has hair pulled. Physical techniques such as blocks, releases, escorts, nudges, and transports can be learned in safety training programs. A block is an effective technique when a client intends to strike a student. The student would deflect the strike by placing an object between the client and student. However, these physical techniques need to be continuously practiced in order to remain proficient (Mitchell & Bray, 1990).

The committee emphasized that field placement agencies should have a program in place to deal with worker postincident trauma. University internship coordinators might supplement agency programs by offering debriefing and support to the affected field student, as well as to other students who fear that they may become victims. Field students need to know that their fears and anxieties are valid. Committee members pointed out that facts and feelings should be processed in an effort to reduce self-blame, restore the field students’ sense of personal control, and find ways to prevent future incidents.

Safety Training Program Models

The Safety for Student Interns Committee agreed that a university-wide safety training program should be implemented with mandatory attendance for all students in field-based learning experiences. The committee formulated and considered three possible models. These were the university resource model, the community contractual model, and the designated trainer model.

The university resource model incorporates and uses resources that are available within the university community. A safety training program would be developed and presented by faculty from various appropriate disciplines. Lectures on predictors of client violence would be offered by psychology faculty. Lectures and experiential training on verbal deescalation would be conducted by social work faculty. Physical intervention techniques would be taught by the physical education faculty. Safety tips for the office and home visits would be presented by university police officers. Universal health safety precautions would be addressed by health professions faculty. Although this model would reduce expenses, it would require substantial coordination between departments.

In the community contractual model, the university would contract with a qualified outside provider to offer safety training programs to field-based students each school term. Content would be agreed on by faculty and the outside contractor. Costs to the university would increase, but faculty would be free from direct delivery of the program.

The university would appoint faculty members to be accountable for all safety training in the designated trainer model. At the university’s expense, the faculty chosen as designated trainers would attend a formal safety training course which would result in certification. Appropriate content for the student safety course would be mutually agreed upon by relevant faculty and designated trainers. Those designated trainers would receive release time from teaching duties to develop, conduct, and administer the training program. Advantages of this model are program centralization within the control of the university.

Committee Action

The Safety Issues for Student Interns Committee agreed to implement the university resource model with some modifications. Those modifications consisted of employing a safety trainer from outside of the university to conduct a workshop
for all internship coordinators and those involved in an ongoing safety training program. The office of the provost was willing to provide funds to pay for the outside trainer’s workshop. A plan could also be developed to use release time allocated by college deans for those individuals responsible for safety program coordination. Each year college deans are given a number of hours that are used to release faculty from teaching duties. Faculty members submit proposals for projects and are awarded release time from teaching duties so they can complete their proposed projects. The individuals coordinating the safety training program would submit proposals for release time from teaching duties.

Due to changes in committee composition, the implementation of the safety training model was delayed. At this point in time, the restructured committee continues to meet and work out details of the safety training plan.

Conclusions

Social Work students have a right to work in a reasonably safe environment. Universities must acknowledge the reality in which students practice and take action to preserve student safety. The implementation of a safety training program demonstrates that social work programs and universities are serious about the well being of their students. The collaborative efforts of the university faculty who were faced with a common problem attests to the value of pooling ideas and working toward a common goal. Departments and programs experienced a sense of empowerment that might not have been possible to achieve individually. The endeavors of the committee demonstrated respect and concern for field students’ situations and it is anticipated that a safety training program will increase student competence and provide improved service to clients.

References


