For over 25 years, Family Continuity, of which I am the chief executive officer, has been a pioneer in providing in-home and community-based services to families in Massachusetts. Since our agency is mobile, we do our best work in the “real world” of neighborhoods, schools and clients’ homes. We believed that our approach to partnering and advocacy makes us collaborators, not antagonists, and shielded us from danger.

But on February 6, 2008, the “real world” came to us. This was the day Diruhi Mattian, the director of our Lawrence Flexible Support Program, was stabbed to death in the home of a Family Continuity client whom she had served for several years. Her alleged attacker, a young man with serious mental issues, had a strong clinical relationship with her. Mattian was an amazing woman, and beyond dealing with our sadness, our goal soon became to honor her life and values, and beyond deal it could incorporate our approach to look differently at safety and providing support for those who work with troubled people, sometimes in dangerous places, at all hours of the day and night. The plan to create a safer culture revolves around four basic steps:

Coming Together: Family Continuity re-activated its safety committee, chaired by the CEO, and charged it with reviewing current practices, polling staff, examining information developed from elsewhere in the field and reporting regularly to all staff and board members.

Reaching Out: The agency contacted resources from as far away as Kentucky, Iowa, North Carolina, Connecticut and Washington, DC. Staff members attended safety training and received policy development advice offered by a variety of in-state and out-of-state institutions.

Organizing & Evaluating Current Practices: While Family Continuity had many resources available, we first needed to evaluate the current practices. In addition, the agency had a great deal it could incorporate from its existing Therapeutic Crisis Intervention and other de-escalation trainings, while the agency’s “check-in” procedure for field-based staff just needed reinforcement, not replacement.

Creating a Safety Plan: To provide a sense of the Safety Plan’s scope, here are some excerpts from our Program Safety Checklist, developed and / or reviewed within the last six months:

- Activating the Safety Committee: We developed a standard safety review process for inclusion in the agency’s Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) goals. We also created a “safety e-library” with information, bibliographies and the new “Weekly Safety Tips on the agency intranet site, and we initiated safety-related facility upgrades.

Despite all of this work, we must admit that as of this day, we do not know that we could have prevented the tragedy of last February. It was a complex and tragic conversion of events. We hope that no harm ever again comes to our staff, our clients or anyone of our colleagues in our field. We also know, however, that people will be safe only when it is made a clear priority for us all. We hope that you will look at this in your agencies as well.

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