Client Violence and Social Worker Safety

Lunchtime Series Webinar

These notes have been taken from a Webinar presented by Dr. Newhill that you, as a NASW member, may take for free: http://www.socialworkers.org/ce/online/lunchtime/lcourses/home.aspx. NASW, OH chapter has also added comments in this overview obtained from findings from formal and informal data collection in regards to workplace safety over the past two years.

The Lunchtimes Series Webinar presenter on Client Violence and Social Worker Safety is Dr. Newhill, associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh, who has over 10 years of psychiatric emergency and inpatient practice experience. Dr. Newhill has conducted research on risk assessment and social worker safety and is the author of the Client Violence in Social Work Practice, Prevention, Intervention and Research. She currently chairs the NASW mental health specialty practice section.

In her workshop Dr. Newhill stated: “Preventing client violence is one of the best things that we can do for our clients because as (Andrew Slayable), psychiatric emergency psychiatrist commented one time, once a client strikes you, from that point on, that client is going to be labeled a violent client. Many clinicians won’t be willing to work with them.”

As we, the NASW-OH Chapter, have heard from social workers there is an increasing concern about violence in the workplace, Dr. Newhill supports this perception stating that she has found a number of indicators that support the perception that there is a rise in physical and verbal violence across settings.

What are the causes?

Potential factors discussed by Dr. Newhill are the following:

- We as a society perpetuate violence, where significant societal problems, such as unemployment, poverty, and lack of health and mental health services support violent reactions to those who may become hopeless and angry.
Possibly our role as a social worker, where we have significant power over the client especially in situations where we have a job that involves “interpreting government regulations and mandates and dispensing resources that clients desperately need and sometimes are not able to provide.” What about the power we have over parental rights or personal rights and making decisions that distress and anger the client.

There are “political issues and policy shifts that have created conditions that increasingly place social workers at risks. For example, as our economy has tanked and our government has cut back on certain types of institutional support that we use to rely on and our clients use to rely on, the number of those needing public assistance and other social services have increased. Budget cuts in our agencies, the ensuing understaffing of social services and rising case loads have also led to increased vulnerability for social workers.”

A number of indicators also suggest that the settings of violence are varied; there still remain some settings that have a higher risk but don’t assume that you are safe just because it has not happened in your workplace. We can no longer assume it only occurs outside of the office, in the home or community of the client. In Ohio we have heard of safety issues from those serving children to the aged, from agency based to community based service providers.

With our current economy and the significant cuts in resources we are seeing social workers carry significant client loads at a rate where the social worker no longer knows their client. Organizations are limiting supports for workers such as providing panic buttons, safety courses, and the ability to go out as a team in a potential unsafe environment are just a few of the impacts.

An alarming finding from Dr. Newhill was the number of agencies “using male social workers as sort of an informal security force but without providing them with adequate training or hazard pay”.

**Where to begin to address this issue:**

The first place Dr. Newhill suggests to start is with information such as understanding risk factors for violent behavior.

- Understand that client violence toward social workers is not a rare event
- The risk varies according to where one works
- Male social workers are at a significantly greater risk of experiencing client violence than female social workers
- Experiencing an incident of client violence exacts an emotional toll on the social worker involved
Take a systems approach;
  - Recognize that violence is not a static individual attribute, rather, violence is an attribute of individuals within certain situations and environmental contexts, i.e. the person-in-the-environment;
  - Always interpret the client’s emotional status and behavior within the context of his/her social/environmental system.

- **Demographic Risk Factors**
  - Young Age
  - Male Gender

- **Clinical Risk Factors**
  - High Risk Psychiatric Symptoms (delusions, hallucinations, violent fantasies)
  - Personality Features (anger, emotion dysregulation, impulsivity)
  - Personality Disorder (antisocial, borderline)
  - Substance Abuse (especially alcohol)

- **Biological Risk Factors**
  - Low Intelligence Quotient (IQ)
  - Neurological Impairment

- **History of violence;**

- **Social and family history** (early exposure to violence);
  - Experiencing severe abuse by a parent or other caretaker or being a witness to domestic violence;
  - Being severely neglected or rejected by parent/caretaker;
  - Parental psychiatric illness and/or drug or alcohol abuse;
  - Tacit parental approval of cruelty toward other people or animals.

- **Work history** (economic instability, unemployment);

- **History of psychiatric treatment and/or hospitalization**, especially if involuntary;

- Level and quality of social support
- Peer pressure from peers who endorse violence
- Influence of popular culture
- Means for violence
- Accessibility of the potential victim

If you have not had training on how to handle a potentially violent client, seek out that training – which may be in a workshop or through the literature. Newhill suggests the following: utilize your clinical skills to deescalate the situation, remain calm, show respect, and never make promises you cannot keep. Above all listen and seek to understand.