

Shake the Gate

Contributed by Kathrin A. Theis, BA, QMRP

The article Protecting the Protectors (in *The New Social Worker*, Winter 2008) struck very close to home for me. I spent 11 years working as a case manager in child protective services. I suffered serious burn-out and left the field for seven years before returning to social services, this time working with people with developmental disabilities at a private agency. The issue of employee safety was not adequately addressed when I was in protective services, but I later realized that it rarely is addressed anywhere in social services.{mosgoogle}

Social workers are trained, and likely got into this line of work, because they think of others first, and their own safety may suffer as a result. I, too, am amazed that what happened to Boni is as rare as it is, but there were many things that could have prevented the tragic loss of Boni's life and all that ensued for her co-workers.

Compassion fatigue and burn-out are rampant in the social services, and is it any wonder? If we feel in danger frequently and are given no way to assure our own safety, few will stay long without suffering grave consequences. Poor health, failing personal relationships, and financial problems can all result from the deadly mix of all the responsibility for our clients and none of the authority to keep ourselves safe.

Hindsight is so very clear. In Boni's case, a better safety plan would have been to require that the visit be held in a neutral setting such as a restaurant or the agency office. Boni should have been advised of the possible risk, in light of the fact that the mother felt in danger of permanently losing her child, and she should have been supported to cancel the visit until a good plan could be developed to assure her safety and the safety of the others involved.

Chances are Boni did have concerns, but took her responsibility too literally, as many of us do all the time. This is of great importance. We must always listen to our gut instincts and act on them. If a situation gives us pause, or makes us feel concerned or nervous, we must give ourselves permission to act accordingly and not enter into that situation, and employers must respect that and support us in our decisions.

It is the responsibility of everyone who supervises social services staff to tell them, "I am responsible for helping you stay safe, and you are important to me. You must always follow your instincts, and I will support your decision if you feel in danger. I want to hear your concerns, and I will take them seriously. Your first responsibility in your job is to keep yourself safe, and mine is to help you do that. Be careful out there!"

I managed to stay safe through many years of field work and challenging circumstances. My husband teaches Aikido, a self defense martial art, and I took Aikido for six years. We have had many conversations about my social services experiences and what may have made the difference between staying safe and becoming a victim. We've used his training and my experience to develop a personal safety program for social workers. You can read about it at the school's Web site at http://www.stlki.org/bus_and_org.shtml.

We started the program because we were approached by a community mental health program that found the Aikido school's Web site and asked us to put together a program for its employees. I was very impressed that they were interested. In doing research for the program, we discovered that there are safety guidelines for social services outlined by OSHA, and these are truly worth reading. Employers do have a responsibility and a role in helping their employees stay safe, but many employers are unaware of the OSHA guidelines and other simple things they can do to protect the protectors. We drew from the OSHA guidelines and also from the social work Code of Ethics to develop our Safe and Sound Program.

Safety should be an ongoing dialogue in every social service agency. By talking about safety concerns and possible solutions, you may learn more than any seminar could ever teach you. Our program may become unnecessary, and that would make me very happy. You will be surprised at what you learn from colleagues.

In one of our workshops, I asked what safety tips the participants had learned through experience. One person said, "Shake the gate." Brilliant! Some dogs will come barking as you approach, but others may lay in wait, and entering a gate could be dangerous. By shaking the gate before you enter, you are likely to find out if there is a dog in the yard that could be of danger to you. Simple! I knew several people who were bitten by dogs when I worked in Children's Services. This could have kept them safe.

We all entered into this field to make a difference in the lives of others. We are important because of what we do, and we are of value to the people we support. We as social service workers must help protect each other first, or we will not be able to protect anyone else. If you are reading this, you are a very important part of your community, so don't forget, Shake the gate!

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