

Personal Safety Considerations During Visits

Facility size and location vary significantly, and Ombudsman program representatives (representatives) often visit facilities alone and sometimes with no prior knowledge of the facility. Although most long-term care facilities are safe there may be circumstances where the Ombudsman program needs to take precautions when visiting (e.g., visits to unfamiliar facilities or areas, facilities with limited regulatory oversight). This resource was created to assist Ombudsman programs in discussing personal safety and minimizing risk during visits.¹



This resource includes key points to consider for personal safety; however, representatives are encouraged to speak with their supervisor and/or State Ombudsman and consult their state program policies and procedures about specific situations and for additional information.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Minimize risks by **planning** before you go:

- ✔ If the program does not have a history with the facility and it is a first-time visit, not in response to a complaint, schedule an introductory appointment.
 - ▶ Consider additional visiting protocols for volunteer representatives of the Office, outlining when it is permitted to visit without a formal introduction to a facility.
- ✔ Do your research – review any past Ombudsman program complaint history or any documented observations; ask other representatives of the Office if they have any concerns or specific precautions; review past licensing and survey inspections and complaint investigations. If possible, share your calendar with your supervisor. Let your supervisor know when and where you are visiting.
- ✔ Ensure you turned the location function “on” for your cell phone and that the battery is charged.
- ✔ If you have any concerns about the location or facility, share your concerns with your supervisor and ask if another program representative can join you for the visit.
- ✔ If necessary, identify alternative directions to and from the facility.
- ✔ When possible, plan enough time for your visit to leave before it is fully dark outside.
- ✔ If you have concerns and another representative is not available to visit the facility with you, re-evaluate whether it is critical to conduct the visit as soon as possible or if it can wait until another representative can join you. If you choose to visit alone, call your office before entering the facility and when leaving the facility. Ask your office to contact you (and to keep calling until you answer) if you don’t call them within an agreed upon time of entering the facility.²

¹This resource was adapted from the Home Care Ombudsman Volunteer Training Manual, Maine LTCOP (December 2013).

²Consider the next steps for the office if the representative does not answer the phone after several attempts from the office. As noted earlier, representatives are encouraged to speak with their supervisor and/or State Ombudsman and consult their state program policies and procedures about specific situations and for additional information.

TRAVEL/PARKING SAFETY TIPS

- ✔ When possible, park in a well-lit area and avoid parking in isolated areas.
- ✔ Park in a place where your vehicle will not be blocked by someone who may arrive after you.
- ✔ If you park in the driveway, park so that your car is facing the street.
- ✔ Lock your doors while making the visit.
- ✔ If you use public transportation:
 - Keep wallets, purses, and valuables secure and out of reach.
 - Pay attention to your surroundings.
 - Carry yourself with confidence, even if you are unfamiliar with the area.
 - Identify public spaces (e.g., libraries, churches) you could enter in case you need assistance.

GENERAL TIPS FOR VISITING

- ✔ Visit during the day, not at night or after dark. If you are investigating a complaint that requires visiting after daylight hours, consider asking another program representative to visit the facility with you.
- ✔ Wear practical shoes and comfortable professional clothing. Wear long pants and closed-toe shoes.
- ✔ Check to see if you have cell service once you reach your location and that the location function is “on.”
 - Keep your phone easily accessible during your visit and until you are inside your vehicle afterwards.
- ✔ Always remain calm, even if a situation is unsettling to you.
- ✔ Carry only what you need. Avoid carrying personal items inside the facility. Lock personal items in your trunk prior to arriving at the facility (if applicable).
 - Leave your valuables at home.
 - Keep your car keys on you.
 - When you leave the facility, have your keys in your hand.
- ✔ Pay attention to your environment.
- ✔ Survey the premises for exits and ways out in the event of an emergency. Sit near a door and face door entrance, if possible.
- ✔ Be wary of tripping hazards such as steps, rugs, or electrical wires.
- ✔ If there are pets outside, do not approach them unless a resident or staff person has indicated it is their pet. If you encounter pets inside the home, be cautious about petting or approaching the animal until someone says it is okay.
 - If you are fearful of dogs or other pets or there are pets which concern you, you may ask that they be contained in a locked kennel or room.
- ✔ If facility staff refuse to allow you inside the facility:
 - Leave program information with the staff (e.g., program brochure, program fact sheet, your business card).
 - Inform the staff that your supervisor will contact the facility owner/administrator.
 - Leave the facility.
 - Contact your supervisor and/or State Ombudsman.

SAFETY CONCERNS DURING A VISIT

- **Proceed with caution and/or consult your supervisor for direction if you encounter:**
 - Unusually loud screaming or other disruptions coming from within the facility,
 - Someone who appears to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs,
 - Facility staff are absent, and/or
 - Management is absent or unresponsive.
- **Contact your supervisor if you:**
 - Are uncomfortable and believe there may be some risk to your safety at any time during your visit.
 - Think that residents are at imminent risk of harm due to the absence of staff or because of potential criminal activity by either staff or residents.
 - Believe that law enforcement or emergency responders should be called.
- **Conclude the visit and share your concerns with your supervisor if:**
 - Firearms are visible and not secured; or
 - There are issues with the facility's physical structure/environment that potentially endangers the safety of residents, staff, yourself, and visits.
 - You perceive imminent danger.

NOTE: If a rare situation requires calling 911, follow your program's policies and procedures related to calling emergency services prior to contacting your supervisor (as applicable).



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