

Department of Health and Human Services

**OFFICE OF
INSPECTOR GENERAL**

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

**Perceptions and Experiences of Local
Public Assistance and Child Support Enforcement
Staff and Managers**



**JUNE GIBBS BROWN
Inspector General**

**MARCH 2000
OEI-06-98-00044**

OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

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OEI's Region VI prepared this report under the direction of Chester B. Slaughter, Regional Inspector General and Judith V. Tyler, Deputy Regional Inspector General.

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June Gibbs Brown //S
Inspector General

OIG Final Report: “Workplace Violence: Perceptions and Experiences of Local Public Assistance and Child Support Enforcement Staff and Managers,” OEI-06-98-00044

Olivia A. Golden
Assistant Secretary for
Children and Families

This report summarizes information we gathered about workplace violence from local public assistance and child support enforcement staff. While examining workplace violence was not an objective of our original data collection, the topic was raised during our pre-inspection process as we gathered information about how local offices deal with clients who might experience domestic violence. Although we did not attempt to comprehensively examine the issue of workplace violence, we feel it is important to share the information provided us by staff from approximately 99 local child support and 103 local public assistance offices in six States - California, Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, Texas, and Virginia.

BACKGROUND

On March 5, 1997, Secretary Shalala issued a memorandum to the heads of all department operating divisions and staff divisions regarding the issue of violence in the workplace. According to the Secretary,

“Every year approximately one million people are victims of nonfatal workplace violence. Most of these assaults occur in service settings such as hospitals, nursing homes, and social service agencies. Another 1,000 workers each year are victims of workplace homicide.”

While the Secretary’s memorandum focuses on improving workplace safety in HHS agency offices, States and local jurisdictions also administer social service agencies and local offices where employees may encounter workplace violence. This memorandum provides information that may be useful to program officials for better understanding the potential for violence in local public assistance and child support offices.

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF LOCAL STAFF

- **Many Managers Fear for the Safety of Their Staff**

Seventy-eight percent of local child support enforcement and 61 percent of local public assistance managers we surveyed responded positively to our question, “*Do you ever have reason to fear for the safety of workers in your office?*”

- **While Actual Reported Violence is Rare, Some Incidents of Violence Have Occurred in Local Offices**

The majority of respondents indicate that, while they are constantly wary of sensitive circumstances that may escalate into violence, the **actual incidences of violence in their offices have been rare**. However, a few offices report greater frequency of threats and actual violent behavior. Staff of both agencies report threats of violence, including “*verbal abuse, terroristic threats, bomb threats and death threats*” and actual violence, including “*aggressive behavior, fighting, altercations/injuries, and carrying guns and knives.*”

While our data do not allow us to measure the frequency of threats or actual violence that occurs in local offices, the language managers use to characterize their concerns indicates the wide range of local office experiences. While many managers say threats and violence occur “*very occasionally*” or “*on rare occasions,*” a few suggest the potential for violence is “*constantly*” or “*regularly*” present. One office manager reports that workplace violence has occurred “*a considerable number of times.*” One child support manager reports the most traumatic incident we heard about, “*One of our absent parents just recently murdered a mental health employee. It could have just as easily been one of us.*”

- **A Variety of Stresses and Circumstances May Lead to Concerns About Potential Violence**

Staff report that the nature of their work often contributes to the stress levels of individuals they serve, potentially leading to threats of violence or actual violence. Managers report that when work circumstances are emotionally charged, clients and others may become “*disgruntled, resentful, angry, irate, or hostile.*” Additionally, a few respondents suggest that recent efforts to more strictly enforce public assistance program rules, as well as the addition of new child support enforcement tools, may be increasing the stress level of some clients and noncustodial parents. For example, one worker states, “*With more enforcement tools available, noncustodial parents are getting angrier all the time. With the increased power provided to us to collect money, file liens, and seize assets, comes the greater risk that our actions may be all that is needed to push someone over the edge.*”

Child support staff report that enforcement actions such as wage withholding, lien filing, IRS tax refund intercepts, bank asset seizures, and driver's license or other license revocations add to stress experienced by noncustodial parents. In cases in which paternity has not been established, putative fathers may experience increased stress due to being required to appear for genetic testing, being excluded as the father by paternity testing, or by a default order of child support prior to paternity testing. Staff also report that requiring child support clients who receive TANF grants to provide information about noncustodial parents, to appear in court or for genetic testing, and to assign their children's child support to the State may create additional stress for these clients. Finally, when public assistance agency staff enforce program rules such as work requirements and time limits or take adverse actions, such as sanctioning or case closure, this may increase stress for public assistance clients.

It is important to note that local staff report that it is generally only a small subset of the people they serve who create the most concern. Specifically, staff indicate that most threats or violent actions come from those with "*violent histories, criminal records, substance abuse problems*" and those who are "*mentally and emotionally challenged.*"

- **A Variety of Security Measures Designed to Reduce or Prevent Workplace Violence Are Used in Some Local Offices**

During on-site visits to local child support and public assistance offices, we observed several structural arrangements designed to reduce the risk of workplace violence including, security personnel inside and outside the building, locked entrances to staff work areas, enclosed receptionist work stations, and open-area interview locations.

However, in many offices, staff conduct interviews in individual offices or cubicles. While these spaces allow privacy for workers to discuss sensitive issues, some workers voice concern that they are often out of sight of others and occasionally fear being too secluded in cases of potential violent reactions by clients and others.

Some staff report some procedural efforts to reduce the risk of a violent incident. For example, one respondent mentions that in cases in which a client has a known violent history, "*the computer is flagged so the worker is alerted.*" However, other staff report concerns that security precautions are insufficient because of, "*lack of proper security, lack of building security, no metal detectors, no panic button, and no bullet proof glass.*"

CONCLUSION

Workplace violence appears to be a concern for many managers in State and local child support and public assistance offices. While local office safety is primarily the responsibility of States, ACF may wish to discuss the extent and severity of workplace violence with its State partners with a view to promoting the development and sharing of strategies which effectively address this issue.

AGENCY COMMENTS

OCSE has already begun a dialogue with the States on the risks of workplace violence and provided us with descriptions of its specific initiatives. These include two staff training videos on preventing workplace violence, a manager's checklist of workplace security needs, plans for presentations at national conferences, and provisions for distributing continuing security bulletins to local office staff. OCSE has also begun development of a course for managers aimed at enhancing local office security.

ACF comments and complete descriptions of these initiatives are provided in their entirety in Appendix A.

APPENDIX A



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Office of the Assistant Secretary, Suite 600
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Washington, D.C. 20447

February 24, 2000

TO: June Gibbs Brown
Inspector General

FROM: Olivia A. Golden *Changin, for*
Assistant Secretary
for Children and Families

SUBJECT: OIG Draft Report "Workplace Violence - Perceptions and Experiences of Local
Public Assistance and Child Support Enforcement Staff and Managers"
(OEI-06-98-00044)

Attached are the Administration for Children and Families' comments on the above-captioned report. If you have questions, please contact David Gray Ross, Commissioner, Office of Child Support Enforcement, at (202) 401-9370.

Attachment

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Date Sent	2/24

COMMENTS OF THE ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ON THE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL'S DRAFT REPORT: "WORKPLACE VIOLENCE - PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF LOCAL PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AND CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT STAFF AND MANAGERS" (OEI-06-98-00044)

General Comments

The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) thanks the Office of Inspector General (OIG) for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. We would like to commend the OIG for uncovering these findings and bringing them to our attention. We are pleased to advise that we have already begun a dialogue with our State partners on this most important security issue.

Local offices regularly find themselves dealing with sensitive topics when enforcing program regulations regarding public assistance and child support enforcement. In addition, they may work with segments of the population with emotional or mental challenges, or those with criminal records or violent histories. Staff are often unaware of these issues when they begin working with a client. The OCSE has therefore focused on providing local managers and staff with various tools to raise security awareness and to provide a safer workplace for all employees.

Outlined below are several security initiatives we have begun, or are planning in the near future. While much of the material is geared to child support enforcement staff, we have found that it is easily adaptable for presentation to, or use by, local public assistance management and staff.

The Child Support Enforcement Program - Securing the Future Video

Produced by the Office of Child Support Enforcement, this 13-minute video draws attention to the data and physical security issues in child support enforcement. The video uses real life scenarios and interviews to demonstrate that the careless use of, or unauthorized access to the data could result in physical harm to the families we serve, and that the data could be used in criminal activities, such as fraud and identity theft. The video, which stars John Walsh of the "America's Most Wanted" television program, discusses how protecting the data and ensuring the physical safety of our child support staff are essential to the continuation of our much needed services.

This video has been distributed to all State Child Support Enforcement Directors and Training Liaisons. In addition, copies of the video have been sent to all OCSE Regional Offices.

The Child Support Enforcement Program - Securing the Future: Training of Trainers (TOT) Course

This six-hour train-the-trainer course is designed to prepare trainers to deliver a security course to child support personnel. The course focuses on raising security awareness and the need to make security a priority in your personal life, the child support program and the office. The

course focuses one chapter on Protecting the Personal Security of the Child Support Worker. Participants in this course receive all the materials necessary to deliver the course to child support workers. In addition, OCSE offers this course in an end-user version with OCSE staff directly training child support workers.

The Child Support Enforcement Program - Securing the Future: Manager's Perspective

This 4-hour course is currently being developed for managers and will focus on security from the manager's perspective. The course outlines the critical role a manager plays in ensuring security of information, personnel and other assets, as well as the need for both security and disaster recovery plans. The course provides managers with an assessment of where they are in security preparedness and provides helpful tools to design and implement a comprehensive, successful security plan.

Manager's Self-Assessment on Security Status and Implementation Planning Guide

This check list is currently being developed and will enable child support enforcement managers to assess the security levels in their own offices. It also provides suggestions to begin implementation of a security plan. OCSE will disseminate the Self-Assessment Tool to the child support managers through a Dear Colleague Letter from David Gray Ross, Commissioner, Office of Child Support Enforcement.

Security Outreach

Staff from the OCSE security team will occasionally attend State and National Conferences to conduct presentations and workshops on security issues. In the presentations, security staff discuss physical security issues, such as workplace violence and highlights the various security training courses available, as well as the self-assessment tool.

Flash Security Bulletins

The Security Team from OCSE is currently identifying State Security Contacts, so that they may be sent Flash Bulletins as the Team identifies security problems, issues, or best practices that States have implemented. This Contacts list may also be used to conduct conference calls so that States may share information and ideas on this most important topic.

We published an article "CSE Office Security and Personal Safety" in the May 1998 issue of our newsletter, "Child Support Report." The article outlined best practice recommendations and a series of security measures States were taking and planning to take to protect employees and customers in the workplace.

Security Website

OCSE is planning to add all of the above information to its website. Our goal is to provide States with as much information and support as possible.

The Office of Child Support Enforcement is committed to providing a high quality security awareness program utilizing various training courses, videos, conference presentations and newsletters addressing security issues and initiatives. OCSE is quickly setting the trend for Federal leadership and support in many areas of security, such as workplace violence. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) recently asked OCSE to showcase it's security initiatives and products at their January conference.