

Section 4 Handout – Victim Safety Planning: Essential Elements of Safety Plans¹

Personal Security Measures

Personal security measures limit the offender's access to the victim or help the victim shield themselves—and information about their whereabouts, activities, and intentions—from the offender. All of these involve some kind of personal loss, dislocation, or disruption of personal/family routines; most of them cost money—and some create significant financial burdens. Victims will understandably and legitimately resent having to bear these costs in order to achieve a measure of safety and privacy. Don't try to undercut these feelings; help them to do what needs to be done despite the fact that “it's not fair.”

Moving

This is easier to do if you are a tenant, although there may be need for legal assistance in getting out of a lease; harder to do when it involves selling a home. This may require leaving the area altogether, and if the offender shares custody of any children involved, the civil courts will be involved.

Try to use a “no name” mover, so you can't be easily traced, or move your things to storage, then use a different company to move them to where you're going.

In extreme cases, relocation is an element of a complete change of identity. Unless a person is involved in a formal victim/witness program, this generally requires a number of illegal acts and a strong commitment to following through, including a willingness to cut most, if not all, existing personal ties.

Protect the confidentiality of your new address:

- Notify the local postal service that it is *not* to release the change of address information.
- Change your mailing address to a private box.
- Use a private mailing service, or rent a post office box in a different location from where you live.
- Use your "post office box" address on personal checks, letterhead, and business cards.
- Get removed from commercial mailing lists that are rented or sold (especially with companies who send you catalogs or publications).

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- Advise the phone company, utilities, banks, and creditors of the change and asking them to put a "code word" on your file to restrict inquiries. (Many credit check agencies have a service that will let you know if someone runs a credit check on you.)
- Register your vehicle at, and have your driver's license list, your "post office box" address.
- Place property or other assets in trust so that your address cannot be obtained through a title records search.
- As far as is legally possible (in the state where you live or from the state that you've fled), protect the new address in transfers of school records and in any legally-required release of educational information.
- Teach children to keep address and phone numbers confidential.
- Change your telephone number, getting an unlisted number and radically restricting whom you give it to, and/or use an answering service or voice-mail number. If you need to share a phone (with a roommate or relative), get a "password" voice mail feature added to your service.
- If you can afford it, you might want to consider using one number to call-forward your calls to yet another phone somewhere else.
- Make sure your address isn't listed in the phone book or "reverse" directories.
- If you are routinely harassed over the telephone and you can find the money, you might want to get a new unlisted line while continuing to use an answering machine to monitor calls to the "old" number. The tapes may be useful as evidence of harassment, threats, or stalking behaviors.
- Use caller ID and call tracing services defensively: know who's calling you before you answer, but learn how to keep your calls from being identified, or call from public telephones.
- Courts have the ability to keep a petitioner's address and telephone number confidential. This will take a formal request from you, and in some cases, from the prosecuting attorney.
- If the offender is on probation/parole, get the name and number of your offender's probation/parole officer and stay in touch.
- Where available, enroll in victim notification systems that will alert you to the offender's release from jail or prison.

Home Security Measures

- Keep doors, windows, basement access and the garage locked.
- Change window and door locks.
- Replace wooden doors with steel/metal doors.
- Install peepholes, window bars, and/or poles to wedge sliding doors.
- Put fire extinguishers near your doors and learn to use them as "intruder repellents."
- If you can afford it or negotiate with your landlord for it; install outdoor (motion sensitive) lighting, timed indoor lights, and/or electronic security systems and alarms.
- Get a dog.
- Program emergency numbers into home and cellular telephones.
- If you are eligible, get involved in victim/witness programs that utilize "panic button" security alert systems, and/or dedicated cellular phones programmed to 911.

Social Habits

- As much as you possibly can, vary your patterns places: join a new congregation; shop at different stores; go to a new dry cleaner; frequent different restaurants and theaters; change banks; work out at a different gym; and find a new hairdresser.
- Teach children how to make collect and emergency calls, and that they can give their address and phone number to "safe" adults (i.e., police or teachers).
- Identify locations to re-group and rehearse "escape plans" with your children. (You should do this in case of fire, in any event.)

Personal support and skills. Don't underestimate the difference it makes when people take the victim's situation seriously, and communicate both concern and respect. The development of a "partnership for safety" reduces isolation and may also reduce feelings of powerlessness and anxiety.