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Approved:	Karen Shea, Interim Deputy Commissioner	Effective: 10/25/2016
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Purpose

To define the roles and responsibilities of staff, supervisors, district directors or managers, CIES, and central office in response to threats or violence against Family Services employees.

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Related Policies

Family Services [Appendix 12](#): Response to Staff Safety Incidents

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Family Services [Policy 140](#): Standby and Call-In

Family Services [Policy 251](#): HOPE (Helping Our Peers Excel) Team

Introduction

The work of the Family Services Division comes with inherent risks. The division’s work with families may cause stress to clients, and some clients may react to our intervention with feelings of anger or hostility, violence, or threats of violence towards staff. Such reactions create risks to the personal safety of staff. Hostility is most often directed towards the division itself, and the resultant safety concerns are applicable to any employee, community partner, or resource family acting on its behalf. The safety of Family Services staff, in the office and in the field, is a vital issue that must remain at the forefront at all times. The importance of staff safety should be given primary attention in the performance of work duties. This policy guides staff in how to:

- respond to threats, violence, and other safety or security issues;
- assess potential risk and the need for teamed responses; and
- properly document safety related concerns.

Policy

Responding to Staff Safety Threats and Incidents

If someone is being assaulted or is in imminent danger, any aware staff shall call **911** or local police. All employees may contact law enforcement about a threat or safety concern at any time.

When a Family Services employee receives or perceives a threat from a person or environment (in person, by writing, telephone contact, online or social media, etc.), the employee will attempt to secure his or her own immediate safety by leaving the situation or location as necessary – or by calling **911**. Family Services employees will immediately notify their supervisor and district director or designee if a staff member or his/her family is threatened with harm or actually harmed. If a supervisor or district director is unavailable, staff may seek consultation directly from the staff safety coordinator or a policy and operations manager.

For a one-page summary of the division’s response to staff safety incidents, see Family Services [Appendix 12](#).

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Immediate Safety Concerns

District directors or designees will implement immediate safety precautions as needed for the employee and/or overall security of the office. If an immediate law enforcement response is needed, the district director or designee shall contact law enforcement immediately. Following the call to law enforcement, the district director or designee shall contact the staff safety coordinator. The district director or designee shall contact the assigned policy and operations manager if the staff safety coordinator is unavailable or out of the office.

The staff safety coordinator shall alert the assigned policy and operations manager of the situation. The staff safety coordinator will follow-up with law enforcement and BGS. After immediate actions are taken to ensure the safety of staff and the district office, the [FS-110](#) and [BGS Security Incident Report](#) shall be submitted.

When dealing with potential criminal behavior directed towards staff, district directors in consultation with the staff safety coordinator may notify the appropriate personnel, such as the assigned AAG, law enforcement, or the local State’s Attorney. All evidence – including voicemails, text messages, social media posts, etc. – supporting the threat or safety concern should be retained and brought to the attention of the appropriate personnel or authority.

All Other Safety Concerns

The [FS-110](#) and [BGS Security Incident Report](#) shall be completed and submitted by the supervisor in consultation with the affected staff. The staff safety coordinator shall review all received FS-110 forms within the business day.

If there is no immediate planning needed, the staff safety coordinator or the assigned policy and operations manager will contact the district director and/or supervisor by email within one business day of FS-110 completion and make arrangements for a phone call. At a minimum, the call should review and document steps already taken and future safety/recovery planning. Affected staff should be included in the phone call unless they decline involvement.

The staff safety coordinator shall alert the assigned policy and operations manager of the situation. The staff safety coordinator will follow-up with law enforcement and BGS.

When dealing with potential criminal behavior directed towards staff, district directors in consultation with the staff safety coordinator may notify the appropriate personnel, such as the assigned AAG, law enforcement, or the local State’s Attorney. All evidence – including voicemails, text messages, social media posts, etc. – supporting the threat or safety concern should be retained and brought to the attention of the appropriate

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personnel or authority.

Threats Received by CIES

If an individual calls Centralized Intake and Emergency Services (CIES) and makes a threat during the phone call, the CIES social worker shall complete the [FS-110](#) (Staff Safety Incident Form) and notify the local district office and staff safety coordinator immediately. If immediate planning for the next working day is needed, CIES will call the staff safety coordinator.

Documenting Staff Safety Threats and Incidents

As indicated above, Family Services employees will immediately report all safety incidents or threats to their supervisor or another available supervisor. Regardless of supervisory availability in the office, workplace or field, no employee should feel they need to wait to report a threat or safety issue. No one shall discourage an employee from reporting a safety or security concern. Therefore, no one shall discourage an employee from completing the [FS-110](#) (Staff Safety Incident Form).

The supervisor shall conduct a supervisory conference with the employee to discuss the safety incident or threat and assess his or her needs. The FS-110 will be completed and submitted by the supervisor in consultation with the person harmed, threatened with harm, or feeling unsafe. The FS-110 is meant to be completed by the supervisor based on this supervisory conference where the affected staff is asked to detail the situation to determine the type of response necessary. The FS-110 may also be used to raise awareness and document concerning behaviors or activities that could become active threats or lead to safety incidents. The supervisor will email the completed FS-110 to AHS.DCFSDStaffSafetyIncident@vermont.gov. **If the district director or designee determines onsite BGS security is needed, they will indicate this in the subject line of the FS-110 email.** This email alias includes the following individuals:

- FSD Staff Safety Coordinator
- FSD Operations Staff
- DCF Director of Operations
- DCF Executive Staff Assistant

The staff safety coordinator will review all FS-110 forms submitted and respond based on the needs and requests of staff. The supervisor and the district director will follow-up with the staff safety coordinator and the employee regarding their desired safety precautions and the response to threats.

In addition to completing the FS-110 form, the FS-110 form should be attached to a BGS

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Security Incident Report. When an incident or threat occurs that involves a State of Vermont employee, Vermont property, or a visitor to a Vermont facility, the incident shall be documented with the BGS Security Division within 72 hours of the incident. The BGS Security Incident Report can be found at:
<http://bgs.vermont.gov/security/incidentreport>

When a BGS incident form is submitted, it is sent to key members of the Security Division. The Security Division will respond by email or telephone within 3 business days asking the person who submitted the form if they need assistance from security.

Emergency Need for Building Accommodations or Assistance

District directors or the staff safety coordinator will determine if further assistance is needed from BGS Security. Examples of assistance from BGS Security include having a security detail assigned to the building site of the incident or threat, putting alarms on doors or windows, putting locks on doors or windows, temporarily re-assigning staff to a safer work location, modifying the site in some other manner, receiving assistance with no-trespass orders, or other safety measures.

Either the district director or staff safety coordinator may report urgent events to the Buildings and General Services (BGS) 24/7 Statewide Security Phone Number at **(802) 828-0777**. This line is answered by the on-duty security officer who can make the proper security notifications to other personnel, including paging the Chief of the Security Division.

If the district director or designee determines onsite BGS security is needed, they shall indicate this in the subject line of the FS-110 email. Additional BGS security or other building modifications must be approved by the director of operations or senior policy and operations manager. The staff safety coordinator will coordinate with BGS and the district office to arrange for approved items.

Resource Family Safety

When a resource parent or family receives or perceives a threat from a person or environment (in person, by writing, telephone contact, online or social media, etc.), the individual should attempt to secure their immediate safety by leaving the situation or location as necessary – or by calling **911**. Resource families are encouraged to immediately notify their social worker if they are threatened with harm or actually harmed. The social worker will promptly notify their supervisor and district director.

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Regardless of staff availability in the office, no resource family should feel they need to wait to report a threat or safety issue. No one shall discourage resource families from reporting safety concerns. The [FS-110](#) shall be completed and submitted by the supervisor assigned to the case, in consultation with the affected resource parent, social worker, and resource coordinator.

The staff safety coordinator will review all FS-110 forms submitted and respond based on the needs of the resource family and district office. Depending on the nature of the situation, either the supervisor, social worker, resource coordinator or staff safety coordinator will follow up with the resource family regarding their desired safety precautions and the response to threats. Coordination should occur on a case-by-case basis to determine who will take the lead in supporting the resource family.

When dealing with potential criminal behavior directed towards resource families, district directors in consultation with the staff safety coordinator may notify the appropriate personnel, such as the assigned AAG, law enforcement, or the local State’s Attorney.

Special Considerations Regarding Notifications of Placement Changes

Division staff should always be mindful of the safety concerns associated with putting a resource family’s home address in writing. All placement information will be communicated to parents through a phone call or in-person conversation. For additional information, see Family Services [Policy 121: Notification of Changes for Children and Youth in DCF Custody](#).

Communication of Threats and Incidents

District directors and managers or designees have an obligation to ensure staff are promptly informed of known threats to their safety. District directors shall communicate safety threats and incidents via email using the subject line “Staff Safety Incident” or “Staff Safety Threat”. District directors shall send staff safety notification emails to all staff within the office/team and the Family Services Management Team (FSMT). The communication of safety threats and incidents by email is intended to reach staff whether physically in the office or in the field, ensure consistency of notifications, and allow for the communication of relevant information. FSMT is included on safety notification emails to ensure the appropriate communication of safety concerns with Centralized Intake and Emergency Services (CIES), Residential Licensing and Special Investigations (RLSI), the System of Care (SOC) Unit, the Domestic Violence Unit, and central office as appropriate.

District directors or designees shall determine when it is necessary to notify community

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partners, building partners, guardian ad litem (GALs), resource families, and other divisions or departments mutually serving clients. District directors are responsible for developing communication plans with co-located building partners and reviewing/modifying communication plans as necessary.

Information conveyed to staff regarding threats and incidents should be factual. Speculative information, rumors, and unconfirmed information should be avoided, unless provided by law enforcement. Messaging should minimize traumatic impact.

Except in extraordinary circumstances, no communication of a threat or incident shall include medical information, information pertaining to the sheltering of victims of domestic or intimate partner violence, or other confidential information. Where circumstances require the sharing of such information, care shall be taken to ensure that it is protected and occurs in consultation with the Domestic Violence Unit as needed.

Threats and Incidents from Mutually Served Clients with DOC

If a threat is made by person who is served by both the Department for Children and Families (DCF) and the Department of Corrections (DOC), DOC should be notified of all threats or safety incidents.

Self-Protection Plans

Based on the circumstances of the threat or safety concern, staff may request a self-protection plan. A self-protection plan is an employee-driven process based on what the staff person reasonably believes will promote his or her safety. Self-protection plans are formalized by the employee and their supervisor or designee during supervision or a supervisory conference when a particular client (an adult or child/youth), family, or environment has been identified as being potentially dangerous or presenting risk to the personal safety of staff.

A self-protection plan can be a simple written outline or paragraph describing specific precautions to be taken upon intervention. Approval by the supervisor may be necessary, depending on the nature of the plan. The employee and supervisor should keep a copy of the self-protection plan. Self-protection plans shall be referred to before initiating contact with the client and/or client's family. Self-protection plans should be dated and reviewed periodically during supervision.

Self-protection plans serve to promote the employee's well-being and lessen risk of threat to personal safety when intervening or initiating contact with the client and/or client's family. Details in the plan could include, but are not limited to:

- Where and when it is best to meet with the client and/or client's family (e.g., in a

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neutral setting, not at the family's home);

- Who, if anyone, should be present when the social worker meets with the client and/or client's family (e.g., another social worker, a supervisor, DOC staff, law enforcement, or the client's network of supports);
- Whether or not the child/youth should be present when the social worker meets with the parents or caretakers; and
- Specific actions to be taken under certain circumstances (e.g., discussing the need for additional security or a law enforcement escort when going to court, immediately leaving the family's home if the client appears to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol or appears to be suffering from a mental health emergency).

It may be necessary to seek legal intervention or no-trespass order(s) to increase an employee's safety. Such an option may be discussed with the assigned Assistant Attorney General (AAG) or local State's Attorney. District directors and the assigned policy and operations manager should be informed if legal intervention or no-trespass orders are sought. The self-protection plan could specify that relief from the court will be pursued in the event of a new incident or if specific behavior persists.

Personal Safety When Conducting Home or Field Visits

Family Services employees should take personal safety precautions when conducting work in the field, particularly at night, in volatile situations, in isolated or extremely rural areas, in known high risk areas (prevalence of crime, gang activity, or drug use/trafficking), when interviewing individuals with a history of violence and significant criminal history, and when interviewing individuals who may be under the influence of undue stress, mental illness, drugs, or alcohol.

Examples of safety precautions include:

- Prior to visiting the home, contacting law enforcement and/or DOC about any recent responses or involvement with the family;
- Becoming familiar with high risk areas served by the local district office, and taking precautions when responding to child safety interventions or home visits in those locations;
- Assessing the presenting allegations, safety and risk concerns, client personalities, and family dynamics while being sensitive to personal risk factors;
- Consulting with or seeking direct assistance or accompaniment from local police authorities when necessary;
- Conducting a teamed response with another social worker or others;
- Ensuring your supervisor and colleagues are aware of your day's schedule, planned home or field visits, and an expected time of return to the office;

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- Being cautious when entering the local district office alone after business hours;
- Operating a safe vehicle in working order with enough gasoline to get to and from the destination;
- Driving around the area of the residence looking for unsafe conditions (poor lighting, unsecured animals, people drinking or using substances);
- Parking where you can see the car while inside the home and parking in the direction you want to leave;
- Locking all doors while in the car and when leaving the car;
- Being alert for danger when entering buildings, hallways, and private residences;
- Making note of entrances and exits in the home;
- Holding your keys while walking to the vehicle;
- Wearing shoes and clothing that make it easy to move quickly; and
- Using the official Vermont DCF photo identification badge to confirm identity when introducing self to clients.

District directors are responsible for ensuring there is a designated contact person informed about employees' whereabouts throughout the workday and to have that contact person follow-up if an employee does not report in as expected.

Safety risks should be assessed, whether formally or informally, prior to each home visit in the field. The commencement of child safety interventions and unannounced home visits may increase safety risks for social workers. Caution and planning are essential for such visits and teamed responses should be utilized when possible.

Teamed Response for Home or Field Visits

Situations may arise that necessitate a two-person response for home or field visits. For the purpose of this policy, this type of response is referred to as a "teamed response" (also sometimes referred to as "the buddy system"). Teams may be comprised of two social workers, or the role may be filled by a:

- supervisor;
- district director;
- resource coordinator;
- human services aides;
- contracted co-located partner;
- community partner;
- service provider;
- substance abuse screener;
- domestic violence specialist;
- DOC staff,

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- law enforcement,
- guardian ad litem (GAL),
- someone within the family’s team or network of support; or
- someone within the family’s safety network.

The social worker and supervisor will determine other individuals who may serve in this role based on the case and specific circumstances.

Use of a teamed response should be discussed with and/or assigned by a supervisor. Supervisors shall determine the need for a teamed response based on consideration of the social worker’s safety. Absent compelling reason to do otherwise, deference should be given to the expressed safety concerns of the requesting social worker. If the supervisor and social worker are in disagreement regarding the need for a teamed response, consultation with the district director or designee should occur.

Circumstances Requiring a Teamed Response

Supervisors are required to approve and/or assign the use of a teamed response in the following circumstances:

- (1) A teamed response is required in any case where records indicate the client or other household members have a history involving (a) assaults or threats of violence; or (b) a conviction involving the use of a weapon in the commission of a crime. In these situations, staff should consider requesting law enforcement assistance.
- (2) A teamed response is required in all active cases that involve ongoing domestic violence, where the alleged perpetrator resides in or frequents the home. For additional safety precautions, staff should seek consultation from the Domestic Violence Unit.
- (3) A teamed response is required in all initial responses to allegations of abuse in unknown (no prior child protection history) cases if requested by the assigned social worker.
- (4) A teamed response is required in all responses to known high crime and drug use/trafficking locations.
- (5) Previously threatened or assaulted social workers will utilize a teamed response until such time as the social worker and his or her supervisor jointly decide that a teamed response is no longer routinely needed.

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Teamed Response in Other Circumstances

In instances where a teamed response is not required by this policy, supervisors may determine that it is necessary based on consideration of all circumstances surrounding a case or work environment. Broad consideration should be given to the safety of all staff, communities, families, and children and youth. If a supervisor determines that a teamed response is necessary, social workers are not permitted to decline.

Examples of other circumstances where a teamed response may be appropriate include, but are not limited to, the following:

- (1) A teamed response may be used when the social worker is transporting a child or doing a home/field visit with clients or household members with known emotional or behavioral problems (e.g., a history of sexually harmful behaviors, physical aggression, making false accusations, or running away).
- (2) When transporting a group of children, depending on the ages and developmental levels of the children, a teamed response may be necessary in order to adequately supervise the children while driving to the destination.
- (3) In cases where the social worker is making an out-of-home placement into a resource family home. By having a teamed response, there are additional supports for the child in an effort to lessen trauma associated with separation from his or her family.

Documenting Teamed Responses

The use of teamed responses should be documented in the case note for the home/field visit. Case notes should detail who was present and the location of the visit.

Safety Documentation

Particularly volatile or potentially dangerous clients and client home/neighborhood situations which could present risk to social workers should be identified and documented in appropriate case record materials as applicable, including but not limited to:

- The intake report, if safety concerns are known by the reporter;
- The investigation or assessment summary, if such information is learned during the child safety intervention;
- A case note alert in FSDNet for the family;
- Notation on the front/outside of the family's case file;
- Description and up-to-date safety information in case notes;

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- Description and up-to-date safety information in the family’s case file;
- The case summary for closing or transfer to another district office; or
- Supervision notes or supervisory conference notes.

Use of Case Note Alert to Document Safety Concerns

A case note alert may be applied in FSDNet to alert staff to dangerous or potentially dangerous situations. These alerts should be dated and list the reason for the alert/safety concern. Reasons for alert include, but are not limited to, the following:

- A history of assaultive or violent behavior in the family, and the cause(s) of that behavior, if known (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness, domestic or intimate partner violence);
- Prior threats against social workers or other state employees and partners;
- Firearms or other weapons in the home or carried by family members;
- Attack dog on premises;
- Residence in high crime, drug, gang, or extremely rural, isolated, or otherwise dangerous area.

The decision to apply a case note alert in FSDNet is made by the social worker and supervisor during supervision or a supervisory conference. Each case note alert should be reviewed periodically to determine if it needs to be updated. Prior to removing the case note alert, the initial reason for the alert and reason for removal of the alert should be documented in case notes.

After Hours Responses from CIES

While the division has after hours coverage in place, the support and information available is not the same as during regular business hours. After hours responses require a different level of safety planning.

In any situation that requires a response after hours and the response requires contact with an individual who may pose danger, the first point of contact will be to law enforcement for the purpose of either joint investigation or assistance. The division will be more cautious after hours and assume danger if information about the family or situation is unknown. In these situations, social workers will only be called out after hours if law enforcement accompanies them.

In situations regarding youth transports or situations where a child or youth require contact with social workers after hours (e.g., accompanying or supervising a child at a hospital or police station), ESP will gather as much information about the child as possible and share this information with the social worker. If limited information is known about a youth entering care because of their own behavior or delinquent acts,

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possible risks and the safety of staff will be considered when deciding how the youth will be transported. ESP will collaborate with the social worker to determine if a teamed response is needed and call-in another social worker if warranted. If a social worker feels they need a teamed response, ESP will collaborate with them to make it possible.

Safety-Related Case Transfer

Situations may arise where a social worker is personally the subject of a physically or emotionally dangerous level of client animosity. In those situations, efforts may include a teamed response or transferring responsibility for that client’s case to a different social worker.

In cases where the district director or designee determines that a case transfer within the office is necessary to decrease risk to the social worker, the transfer should occur as soon as possible.

When a case has been transferred to another social worker for safety reasons, the district director or supervisor shall inform the newly assigned social worker of the reason for the transfer and provide any available information relevant to ensuring the newly assigned social worker’s safety. A case note alert and self-protection plan should be in place prior to reassigning the case.

There may be circumstances where transferring the case to another social worker does not resolve the danger or threat. Consultation with the assigned policy and operations manager and the staff safety coordinator is required when the district office requests to transfer the case to a different district office. In these instances, district case transfer may be considered following the guidance set forth in Family Services [Policy 211: Transfers Between District Offices](#).

Additional Resources

[Family Services Staff Safety Intranet Page](#)

[Planning Checklist for Home and Field Visits](#)

[Safety Checklist for Home and Field Visits](#)

[Family Services Protocol for Conducting Child Abuse Investigations When Domestic Violence and Child Abuse/Neglect Co-occur](#)

[Department for Children and Families Domestic Violence Protocol](#)

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Tasks

Tasks of the Person Harmed, Threatened with Harm, or Feeling Unsafe:

- Communicates daily plans, whereabouts, and expected return with his or her supervisor and designated contact person within the office
- Attempts to secure his or her own immediate safety by leaving the situation or home as necessary, or by calling 911
- Immediately notifies his or her supervisor and the director/manager of the incident, threat, or any instance where he or she does not feel safe
- Meets with his or her supervisor to discuss the incident/threat while the supervisor completes the FS-110 and BGS Security Incident Report
- Seeks consultation from the staff safety coordinator as needed
- Works collaboratively with his or her supervisor to develop a self-protection plan, if desired
- Contacts law enforcement about threats or safety concerns at any time he or she feels necessary
- When applicable and in accordance with this policy, notifies involved community partners on a case of any reports of safety concerns and actions taken in response

Supervisory Tasks:

- Advises the director/manager of the incident or threat
- Conducts a supervisory conference with the employee to discuss the incident/threat and assess his or her needs
- Completes the FS-110 and emails the form to AHS.DCFSDStaffSafetyIncident@vermont.gov
- Attaches the completed FS-110 to the BGS Security Incident Report, found at <http://bgs.vermont.gov/security/incidentreport>
- Works collaboratively with the employee to develop a self-protection plan, if desired by the employee
- Follows up with the employee regarding their desired safety precautions and the response to threats
- Promptly responds to requests for teamed responses and case note alerts, and determines when teamed responses and case note alert are necessary for staff
- Is knowledgeable of employees' daily plans, whereabouts, and expected return
- Engages in ongoing safety conversations with the employee during supervision
- Ensures staff safety protocols are reviewed in individual and group supervision on a monthly basis
- When applicable and in accordance with this policy, notifies involved community partners on a case of any reports of safety concerns and actions taken in response

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Director / Manager Tasks:

- Calls 911 or seeks the assistance of local law enforcement if immediate action or protection is needed
- Reports any urgent events to the BGS 24/7 Statewide Security Phone Number at (802) 828-0777
- Implements immediate safety precautions as needed for the employee or overall safety of the office
- Follows up with the employee regarding their desired safety precautions and the response threats
- Promptly notifies staff of threats to office safety and ensures communication of relevant information, including a photo if possible
- Communicates information necessary for all staff safety to essential parties and co-located partners
- Consults with staff regarding disagreements on the need for a teamed response
- Ensures there is a designated contact person informed about employees' whereabouts throughout the workday
- Ensures staff safety protocols are reviewed in staff meetings at least quarterly
- Develops communication plans with co-located building partners and reviews/modifies as necessary

Staff Safety Coordinator Tasks:

- Consults with division staff on safety-related concerns, threats, and incidents
- Ensures districts and affected staff are supported in addressing safety concerns
- Alerts the assigned policy and operations manager of safety-related incidents
- Collaborates with law enforcement and BGS on safety-related incidents
- Reviews all FS-110 forms submitted and responds based on the needs and requests of staff
- Works collaboratively with BGS and the DCF Director of Operations as needed to implement safety responses
- Coordinates with BGS and district offices to arrange for approved security items
- Ensures the appropriate communication of safety concerns with Centralized Intake and Emergency Services (CIES), Residential Licensing and Special Investigations (RLSI), the System of Care (SOC) Unit, the Domestic Violence Unit, central office, and others as appropriate