

Threats social workers face in the digital era



Introduction

If you speak to most social workers, they'll tell you how rewarding it is to help troubled individuals improve their home, work, and family life. However, that reward does not come without risk.

More than ten years ago, *Social Work Today* published an article entitled "Violent Crime and Social Worker Safety." The article illustrated in sometimes frightening detail how social workers can experience dangerous situations in their profession.

"In the past few years alone, we have witnessed the fatal stabbing of a clinical social worker in Boston, the deadly beating of a social service aide in Kentucky, the sexual assault and murder of a social worker in West Virginia...and the brutal slaying of social worker Teri Zenner in Kansas," the article states. "These are only a few of the murders of our colleagues, which, along with numerous assaults and threats of violence, paint a troubling picture for the profession." Since then, sadly, the danger has only become more pronounced.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), and the Department of Justice (DOJ) agree that mental health care workers face some of the highest levels of job-related violence.

According to the University of Maryland School of Medicine, about 80% of psychiatric nurses, 20% of social workers, and 10% of clinical psychologists are attacked by a patient at one time in their career. During their training, up to 65% of psychiatry residents are physically assaulted by patients. Over 80% of psychologists reported having been afraid that a client would attack them.

There is also a potential risk placed on family members of counseling center professionals. One survey showed nearly 1 out of 10 respondents had experienced a family member being stalked.

As frightening as these numbers seem, it is likely they still do not tell the whole story. Inconsistent reporting policies or feelings of self-reproach often prevent mental health professionals from reporting dangerous patient behavior. As a result, the actual rates of stalking and violence may be higher.

The Anger Explosion

Media, social media, the Internet, and a general decline in thoughtfulness and prudence have created a more dangerous culture in which personal attacks and the demonization of a person based on one comment or action have become commonplace. This is not a healthy climate for those already dealing with mental health challenges.

Information is Power

When one's job involves assisting vulnerable communities experiencing challenging situations, there is no way to avoid all inherent risks. But the nature of these threats has evolved, and social workers (as well as the organizations that represent them) must be aware of this, and adapt accordingly.

As one social worker shared, the biggest concern used to be acient following him home, and thus finding out where he lived and putting his family in a potentially dangerous situation.

Today, that client can just go online and find their social worker's address with a five-minute Google search. This has already happened, far too often, and has resulted in intimidation and physical assaults.

A particularly driven individual can take that information even further. In one California community, someone made a YouTube video about his caseworker, with images and information he compiled from research, social media, and other resources online. "It was a very scary situation," she said.

We are also now living in a political and social climate that fosters division and resentment, which can also lead to violence. As another social worker put it, "People became unhinged after 2020's events, so whoever represents the government or an institution is now a target. We got actual threats and not just threats out of frustration." And sometimes social workers unwittingly contribute to their risk level, by not holding to stricter boundaries and best practices in their online activities.

All of us, to varying extents, have sacrificed some of our privacy for the convenience of online communication and activity, and we understand that many of the records once stored only on paper are now accessed electronically. As a result, however, anyone can now search for an individual online and find out where they live, the name of his or her spouse and where they work, and where their children attend school. This content is gladly sold by "people finder" websites with no regard for how it may be used.

Statute-Based Protection

Legislation was proposed to make attacks against social workers an automatic felony, but no progress has been made on its passage for years.

At present only one state – Colorado – has passed a law that makes it illegal to post online the names and addresses of social workers.

Most states are currently considering consumer privacy legislation that would allow anyone to "opt-out" of having his or her personal data collected, shared, or sold. However, laws are just words on paper unless they are enforced, and social service agencies do not have the resources or the personnel to take the necessary action on behalf of every employee who is threatened.

Addressing This Challenge

The objective now must be to provide security services that reach beyond the social worker's office and into their homes, and even into cyberspace, and to do so within tighter budgets. How should social services organizations respond when their personnel are endangered outside the workplace?

Three options are available:

Option One: Doing Nothing

Like fire insurance on a home, online privacy protection is an investment against an occurrence that may never happen. However, while the number of residential fires has not risen over the past decade, one cannot say the same about the number of threats and attacks against social workers.

The Internet now presents a cornucopia of options to the individual determined to seek vengeance against a therapist who makes a recommendation that causes trauma, such as removing children from a home where they may be in peril. Social media offers an outlet to share grievances on platforms with millions of subscribers. "The State Took Away My Daughter" and "My Social Worker Lied About My Rehabilitation" are the types of posts that many would click on, unaware that they are reading only one account of these situations. Such posts may be picked up by blogs, local media, or cable news channels, further increasing their reach.

These posts inevitably generate sympathetic responses, and may escalate into death threats against the professional who is invariably named in the post. As online words get sharper, people react more viscerally, and may eventually carry out violent actions in the real world.

There have also been situations where offenders have created websites specifically to target a social worker, often using his or her name in the URL. The reach of such sites is comparatively limited, but they may be indexed by search engines and appear if someone searches for that person. Once someone with a grudge has a social worker's home address, any number of disturbing scenarios may result.

It's easy to view inaction as the most economical option available. However, there are additional costs associated with privacy issues that are often not acknowledged. Professionals who receive threats and do not feel protected by their department are more likely to have morale issues, take more frequent sick and vacation days, and perhaps even opt for resignation or early retirement.

Any social worker could, in the absence of any help from their employer, take action to provide privacy protection for themselves and their families.

This would require frequent online searches to locate where their private information is available, and emails demanding that this content be removed. However, doing so is a long, arduous, and time-consuming process that at best will yield imperfect results.

When information is removed, many state statutes require that it only stays removed for a limited period. It may also be reinstated by mistake (Dr. Bob Jones has his address removed, but Bob D. Jones [same person] is still listed on a website). Many sites that profit from selling information will simply ignore requests to remove it, knowing that they risk a punitive fine, but that risk is likely minimal.

Should the social worker be successful in his or her efforts, that success will be temporary without constant monitoring. Buying or refinancing a home, getting a credit card, getting married or divorced, opening a bank account, or even signing up for a loyalty program at a grocery store can result in new information entering databases. And then the removal process starts all over again.

Given the time and effort necessary to find this content, remove it, and make sure it stays removed, many courts are contracting with outside agents that search, remove and, in a few cases, sue repeat offenders.

Option Two: Provide Protection After an Attack or Credible Threat

Given the ever-escalating rise in threats and attacks, it is almost inevitable that every social services organization in every state must one day contend with situations where someone fears for his or her safety.

When this happens the organization must assume some responsibility for that person's protection, which should also extend to family members. That may entail a wide range of expenditures, up to and including security personnel, professional consultation on threat assessment, and other emergency measures. All of these efforts, none of which had been calculated in their annual budget, will be far more expensive than investment in the type of advanced precautions that contribute to a secure and sustainable workplace.

Option Three: Online Privacy Protection

Nominal programs exist that claim to provide online privacy protection. Such programs monitor the sites where private content is most likely to turn up, and then send a form letter requesting its removal, or report search results to their clients and have them follow up directly.

For some in the general public, this may be sufficient. It will lower participants' exposure and may keep them away from a few online scams and annoying robocalls. Such programs, which have proliferated over the past few years, also allow organizations to assure their personnel that something has been done to make them feel more secure. But limited searches of private databases and one-time removals are insufficient to address the nature and seriousness of threats against social workers and other professionals who make life-and-death decisions every day. Companies that pay lip service to protecting clients, while not actually doing it, are putting those clients and their families in danger.

Comprehensive privacy protection programs are also available, and are now being utilized by Supreme Court justices, federal justices, police organizations, and government agencies.

These programs consist of multiple components that work in unison to eliminate the publication of the private data of subscribers, reduce the likelihood of such content being found at a later date, and equip members with additional tools to keep them safer. Companies use proprietary software to conduct searches across every aspect of the Internet, not just a few select sites. When a social worker's home address is located, a series of communications is initiated with that website until the content is removed. Those that do not comply are referred to the state attorney general, or taken to court.

Since personal information is the foundation for the impetus of most threats, these companies also take action to control the dissemination of this information and limit access to it when necessary, while simultaneously flooding channels with content that does not lead back to the people under protection. There are simple solutions for masking one's email address, cell phone number, and online search and browsing history. Once these are implemented, the result is less genuine information to be exploited, and a replacement of identifying content with content that conceals the identity of the user, and thus cannot be utilized for nefarious means.

Education is another key factor. This may be offered through training classes and webinars that increase awareness and provide a greater sense of confidence in personal security.

While cost is always a concern, a closer examination suggests that protecting individuals at home can be more economical than protecting them at work. Costs can be shared on a state and federal level; states like Tennessee have introduced bills that provide protections and allocations of state grants that may be used to pay for these services for some personnel.

Get Started: Protect Yourself Now

If you're a social worker concerned about your own safety, or manage a team that you'd like to protect, Ironwall is ready to go to work for you.

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