



Wisconsin Safe Exchange & Supervised Visitation Guidelines

Staffing Patterns

The management of Safe Exchange and Supervised Visitation (SEV) personnel should follow standard personnel management best practices. Issues of staff liability, benefits, wages, and evaluation should be congruent with an agency-wide personnel handbook and state law. This guideline will focus on staffing considerations of particular interest to SEV projects.

SEV work is demanding, emotionally draining, and often not well-compensated. Service participants build relationships with SEV staff and depend upon their continuity and competency. SEV direct service staff are intimately involved in the lives of families seeking services. These families are impacted by staff turnover, inadequately trained staff, and staff decisions. Service recipients are highly attuned to staff that attempt to understand their situations and can partner with them in reducing the violence and related dynamics in their lives during exchange and visitation.

Staff qualifications and experience will be determined by the philosophy of the parent organization or contractor of services. Funding and other resources will also impact the staff hiring and support. Staff educational requirements can vary from high school diploma through MSW or PhD, depending on the levels of intervention. Families vary in their intervention and support needs. Scope of services to be provided and staffing patterns are tightly linked. In the best case scenario, these will be driven and supported through community needs and resources.

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Your staff is your agency's greatest resource and your most significant public relations asset.

Staff will determine the success of your agency's efforts in serving your target population and sustaining your agency's viability.

Wisconsin SEV Assessment Summary on Staffing

Service providers and current/potential service recipients (focus group participants) were surveyed on their thoughts pertaining to staffing SEV programs. Providers varied in their training, educational, and experiential requirements for staff. Four out of eleven respondents did not require DV/SA training. Two did not require training specific to SEV services. On average, two staff members were present during safe exchanges and during supervised visitation. Most supervised visitations are staffed with one staff member per family. Most agencies had SEV staff also performing other roles within that agency and felt confident that staff could maintain appropriate boundaries and confidentiality. Most direct service staff wages were in the \$8-15/hour range.

Focus group participants provided core recommendations on staffing that are well worth listening to and incorporating into SEV program staffing strategies.

Staff turnover is a critical concern to program participants.

Pay staff enough to keep them!

Staff training is essential.

Under-trained staff members present risks to service participants and their families. In addition to fully understanding the impact of the dynamics of DV/SA on all family members, staff should be able to de-escalate many types of situations; provide role models for all family members; coach families with parenting questions; and work with families to improve safety. Focus group members were particularly concerned that staff members understand the impact of DV/SA on kids and the strategies used by adult victims to protect their children.

Staff approach their work with all family members without pre-judgment or bias.

Staff with multiple roles in an agency (particularly if they are also a DV/SA advocate) might not be viewed as “neutral.” This can present an obstacle in connecting with the other parent or family members, but it doesn’t have to – sometimes it can provide a continuity of services for families. Focus group members were concerned about advocates sharing information or even appearing biased when working with the “batterer.” Any “leak” of information or “attitude” can result in backlash for the non-offending parent or children. In addition, staff biases for or against any program participant can inhibit a family’s ability to access the services. However, focus group members were united in wanting SEV staff to hold all participants accountable for following the rules AND be aware of possible manipulation of the rules.

Staff demonstrate good communication skills and respect for all family members and support each family’s cultural values.

Parents want support and information on how to better parent their children, reduce their children’s exposure to violence, and enhance family safety. They were also interested in staff respecting and supporting family values, culture, and holidays different from the dominant culture.

Staff work with family members to help them achieve their goals.

Parents want to be included in developing a plan of action for their family that reduces violence and moves towards some form of parallel-parenting. Children’s views and wishes are to also be considered. It is helpful to the family when staff members listen to what family members say regarding what does and doesn’t work for them and respond accordingly.

Staff are “quietly” visible.

Focus group members prefer to have only one person visibly present during the visit or exchange. However, they also felt it was important to have staff members always visible to the “abusive” parent as an incentive for them to appropriately manage their behavior.

Some Staffing Basics

- ◆ Determine what work needs to be done. Does it require general or specialist skills? How many of the job competencies do you want to come with the person? How many of the competencies can be developed on the job? How much weight will be given to life experiences, academics, professional experiences, and connections to marginalized populations?
- ◆ Who will you involve in the hiring, orienting and training processes? Will the executive director do it all? Will you have staff teams, supervisors, peers, others?
- ◆ Design an interview process that allows you to find the right fit for both the agency and the applicant. Be honest about the depth of the work and the difficulty of the work. Some agencies insist on job shadowing as part of the interview process. Include interview questions that require a candidate to respond to real-life situations.
- ◆ Welcome new staff and orient them thoroughly to the agency. It will take most people three to six months of employment to become independently functional at the work. Be sure at least one person within the agency is available as a mentor to the new staff throughout the first six months and even beyond. Monitor new staff growth within the work being done. Provide for new and more challenging responsibilities when new staff members are ready.
- ◆ Many of the staff problems that arise are due to insufficient training or monitoring. Be sure to understand the difference between a staff member that needs corrective or disciplinary action and one that is under-trained to do the work being expected of him or her.
- ◆ Be clear to staff about what content and procedural competencies are expected of them.
- ◆ Implement an “open-door” policy so staff can always have an option to ask questions and explore options with someone more experienced in the work.

Staff Qualifications

The qualifications of staff vary greatly from program to program, dependent upon the scope of services being provided and the subsequent mandated certifications required. Key areas of discussion surrounding staff qualifications include ranges of appropriate expectations for volunteer and paid staff, and the level of post-high-school education to be required.

Programs providing a therapeutic component or being contracted by another entity to give “professional” comment or perspective on a family will typically require advanced degree staff. These programs may be more apt to set very specific educational and professional requirements for all staff hires. Programs grounded in a philosophy of providing supportive services will typically place more focus on life experience and personal characteristics: these may focus more specifically on the personal and interpersonal skills of the prospective staff members.

There seems to be general agreement on the following basic staff requirements. All staff members, volunteers or interns typically must:

- ◆ Be at least 18 years of age.
- ◆ Have a valid driver’s license and auto insurance.
- ◆ Have successfully completed a thorough background check, including screening for prior criminal record.
- ◆ Be of good moral character (this is specifically defined by a program in their employee handbook).
- ◆ Be able to set good personal and professional boundaries for working with families.
- ◆ Enjoy working with and supporting families in a non-judgmental manner.

SEV program directors indicate mixed results with employing volunteers and student interns. Both of these groups require deliberate and consistent oversight. Training on subject matter, agency policies and guidelines, documentation, etc. must also be covered with them as with any staff member. Commitment and reliability are sometimes issues and expectations must be clearly communicated. Both of these groups can greatly enhance and extend services to people who would otherwise not have access.

Regardless of the scope of services being provided, all staff must thoroughly understand how to recognize domestic violence and sexual abuse and support families when these dynamics are present.

Staff Growth, Development, and Support

Regularly offer educational opportunities in pertinent topics:

- ◆ **Understanding the dynamics of domestic violence and sexual abuse.** Training should include how perpetrators of DV/SA inappropriately use a pattern of dominance, entitlement, manipulation, and threats to control their partners, children, other family members, and often system players to their benefit. All staff must understand how the dynamics of domestic violence and child sexual abuse will often impact a family’s capacity to function and the staff’s ability to perform their work. SEV direct service staff may be the only “agency” people who will identify the presence or the depth of battering/grooming behaviors in a family. Staff must have the tools to work through the resulting complications.
- ◆ **Stalking and grooming behaviors.** Training should include the impact of these behaviors on the safety of participants, family members and staff.
- ◆ **Recognizing personal biases** related to sexism, racism, and classism and how these will influence their observations of families, and, consequently, their documentation.
- ◆ **Setting boundaries and balance** in meeting the needs of multiple constituencies: parents, children, court system, private attorneys, etc. Gaps in services, inconsistencies in agency and/or system protocols, and conflicting personal views on parenting, court decisions, etc. can create frustration for SEV direct service and administrative staff. Staff will experience less stress and frustration if they understand how agency policies and guidelines provide flexibility in meeting families’ needs and protecting children. Agency policies and guidelines should be routinely reviewed by staff, volunteers, and service recipients.
- ◆ **Understanding environmental emergency responses, mandated reporting, child-in-the-middle, agency documentation, critical incidents, confidentiality, community systems protocols and function, available community resources.**
- ◆ **Personal development** in conflict resolution and redirection.
- ◆ **Safety planning** considerations for participants and staff.

Staff development is an ongoing process — not a one-time event. Acknowledge the complexities of doing this work by providing staff access to ongoing resources and support.

Regularly schedule staff meetings to address agency “process” concerns and assure ongoing on-the-job training opportunities.

- ◆ Consider conducting weekly staff meetings in order to share service recipient information regarding court hearings, details about family members, and any developments in family cases.
- ◆ Encourage ongoing conversations between staff and families to explore ways to provide better services.
- ◆ Staff members provide each other ongoing feedback, suggestions, and support. Some programs ask staff to maintain a staff training log to self-monitor their professional growth.

Documentation and Paperwork

Sample Staff and Volunteer Forms

There are forms directly related to personnel management. All forms and personnel protocols should be reviewed and approved by the organization's board of directors. It is also helpful to have an attorney or external consultant who specializes in personnel and employment matters review the materials and protocols.

- ◆ *Position descriptions.*
- ◆ *Affidavits of good moral character and character references.*
- ◆ *Criminal records checks, driving records checks. These will probably require a payment to a county or state agency. Driving records will only be needed if someone is expected to transport participants as part of their work/volunteer requirements.*
- ◆ *Copy of auto insurance coverage with liability that meets agency minimum.*
- ◆ *Staff code of conduct agreement.*
- ◆ *Confidentiality agreement.*
- ◆ *Staff training log.*
- ◆ *Staff orientation manual.*
- ◆ *Staff growth, development and review plan.*

WI SEV Consulting Committee Recommendations on Staffing

Staff must thoroughly understand the organization's philosophical foundation and how it guides all services provided to families.

New staff orientation should help staff become immersed in the organization's philosophy, purpose, goals, and core policies and procedures. The Wisconsin SEV consulting committee recommends that staff integrate a "philosophy of serving people." They further define this as being self-motivated, positive, strength-based, client driven and non-judgmental. Encourage staff to routinely review their participant contact in the context of the organization's philosophy, mission, and purpose. How does their approach support families who are served?

Staff position descriptions clearly outline roles and expectations.

Job position descriptions and the services staff provide to families are the application of the agency's philosophy. Their work is the "walk" in "the talk."

Staff roles in documentation and accountability are clearly defined.

Staff members need to understand their role in managing accountability: parent to parent, parent to court, parent to child, agency to agency, etc. Be sure each staff person thoroughly understands how their approach to providing services and documentation can become controlling and have a possible negative impact on family participants. Staff must understand how their actions can unintentionally re-victimize victims or collude with batterers/perpetrators. Staff members must have adequate time and training to meet documentation expectations. Realistically estimate the amount of staff time it will require to provide participant-centered services and complete the documentation. If staff can't complete the documentation when it needs to be done, review and modify the process!

Clearly define the parameters of confidentiality and its limitations.

Operationally define what confidentiality means in your organization. Who can staff consult with regarding a family without a release of information? Staff must understand how releases of information will be routinely requested of custodial parents, non-custodial parents, victims of domestic violence/sexual abuse, and perpetrators of domestic violence/sexual abuse. How will children be informed of the levels and limits of confidentiality pertaining to their behaviors and disclosures? How will breaches of confidentiality be addressed?

Ongoing staff education is essential.

Allocate adequate staff time and funds for training. Provide on-the-job support for integrating new concepts and skills. Include staff members in ongoing policy reviews and revisions.

Establish a way for staff to debrief and process difficult situations that arise from family contact.

Emotional and physical burn-out are very real components of SEV work. Plan staff time to process difficult cases. Consider personnel benefits that can reduce burn-out. Some agencies have weekly staffing sessions; others provide staff support groups, employee assistance benefits, mental health days, etc., and combinations of all of these.

Encourage staff to network.

Provide direct service staff opportunities to build professional relationships with direct service staff from other agencies. It is important that staff members are clear on agency policies, guidelines, and boundaries; and under what circumstances they can speak for the agency within the community.

Developing and maintaining outside contacts can increase staff knowledge of community resources available to participants, improve referrals between agencies, enhance cross-agency accountability, build staff self-confidence and reduce isolation.

Resources on SEV Staffing

SUPERVISED VISITATION — A COMPETENCY-BASED MANUAL FOR FLORIDA’S SUPERVISED VISITATION CENTERS

Maxwell, M.S., Robinson, S., and Oehme, K. Clearing House on Supervised Visitation, FL Department of Children & Families, 1999. <http://familyvio.ssw.fsu.edu/index.html>

NONPROFIT PERSONNEL FORMS & GUIDELINES

Mathew J. De Luca SPHR. List Price: \$173.00, ISBN: 0834204223, Aspen Publishers, 1-800-638-8437, <http://www.aspenpublishers.com>

SOCIETY FOR NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Produces *Nonprofit World* and other publications. Annual membership fee. <http://www.snpo.org>

The Wisconsin Safe Exchange and Visitation Project was initiated by Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance and funded through the Federal Violence Against Women Act Safe Havens initiative. An interdisciplinary statewide consulting committee has guided the process from its beginning in May, 2003. Initial project facilitation and product development was completed by Kieffer Consulting and Facilitation, LLC, Strum Wisconsin. Additional partners in SEV project development include Wisconsin Children’s Trust Fund, Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Wisconsin Department of Justice – Office of Crime Victim Services, and Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services.

Wisconsin Safe Exchange and Visitation Project purposes:

- To assess status of SEV services available to families experiencing domestic violence and/or sexual abuse.
- To develop guidelines for developing and sustaining new SEV services Statewide.
- To develop a sustainable network that provides technical assistance and support to SEV services providers.

Access SEV information online through <HTTP://WCTF.STATE.WI.US>