



Occupational Exposures and Safe Work Practices

As our population grows, demands for social and human services continues to increase in the United States. Social service jobs include child care workers, home health aides, personal care aides, rehabilitation counselors, social workers, and substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that employment in this field will grow 10% from 2014 to 2024, faster than the average for all occupations.

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Resources and References

- Occupational Hazards in Home Healthcare: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2010-125/pdfs/2010-125.pdf>
- OSHA Safety and Health Topics – Home Healthcare: https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/home_healthcare/index.html
- National Association of Social Workers Standards for Palliative & End of Life Care: <https://www.socialworkers.org/practice/bereavement/standards/standards0504New.pdf>
- Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Health Care and Social Service Workers: <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/osh3148.pdf>

In some of these roles, workers may face unique risks and hazards, including unfamiliar work environments or settings not under their control. Some of the most common exposures and sources of injury include:

- Musculoskeletal disorders
- Slip and falls
- Aggressive behaviors and workplace violence
- Driving

The risks are significant. For 2014, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported social assistance and health care workers had 164,440 days-away-from-work incidents, the most of any private sector industry. This translated into a rate of 121.3 cases per 10,000 full-time workers. Musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) accounted for 39% of the total injuries and illnesses reported in the social assistance and health care industry, according to the BLS. The MSD incidence rate decreased to 46.9 cases in 2014, down from 50.2 cases per 10,000 full-time workers in 2013.

Musculoskeletal Disorders

When handling clients in need of physical rehabilitation, adults with developmental challenges or even young children, employees in these situations need to be able to twist, bend, stretch, reach and perform other awkward postures. One study determined that home care workers who frequently performed heavy lifting, lifted with awkward postures and lifted without mechanical assistance were likely to have permanent work disability.

To eliminate or reduce the risk for similar injuries, social service workers are encouraged to use transfer and mobility devices and equipment, such as gait belts, friction-reducing devices, mechanical lifts, etc. Clients, family members and social service workers should consult with equipment vendors and their loss control representatives to choose devices that will reduce the worker's strain while maintaining the client's safety and comfort.

Aggressive Behaviors and Workplace Violence

Serving clients in an environment where they're comfortable and that can facilitate healing is important in social service work. However, these settings do increase the chance that a worker may come into contact with individuals with aggressive or violent behaviors. Social service workers face an unprotected and unpredictable environment every time they enter a client's home or community.

In 2013, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported more than 23,000 significant injuries due to assault at work, with more than 70 percent of these assaults in social service and health care settings. And 27 out of the 100 fatalities that occurred in these settings in 2013 were due to assaults and violent acts. Social service and health care workers are almost four times as likely to be injured as a result of violence than the average private sector worker.

For more information

UH Loss Control is committed to providing social service workers access to resources and training that can help them work safer. For more information, contact your United Heartland Loss Control representative or call 1-800-258-2667.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that an effective violence protection program requires that:

- Client and family provide a safe, home environment.
- A worker should be able to assess risks in the environment.
- An employer should provide information about the responsibility of the patient's family.
- The employer should train the staff to assess risks and implement acceptable interventions.

Individuals can react with anger because of difficulty in finding help with their situations, emotional pain or discomfort, or fear and anxiety about the results of a visit from a social worker or counselor. If a worker is in a potentially threatening situation, he or she should:

- React and respond to the individual in a calm but firm manner.
- Lower the volume of their voice and speak in an even tone to help the individual calm down.
- Move slowly and give themselves an out.
- To help the individual define their anger, acknowledge it. "I understand that you are upset" or "It sounds like you're really angry about this."
- Reinforce the positive long-term benefits of their assistance, their commitment to their client's best interests and their role as an ally.
- Encourage the individual to sit down.
- Rehearse ahead of time what they'd say or do in these situations.
- If the situation appears dangerous, the worker should leave and call a supervisor.
- If the environment has been unstable in the past, employees should set up a "code word" system with their home office. For example, if a visit become dangerous, the employee can call the office and say, "I would like to speak with Mr. Blacksmith," who is a fictitious counselor. The operator would say he was unavailable and then know to call 911 and send police to their location.

If an employee is working at night or in an uncomfortable area, some home health care organizations allow employees to call a security agency for an escort.

Slips, Trips and Falls

Providing care for clients at their home or in unfamiliar settings presents slip, trip and fall (STF) hazards that cannot be controlled in the same manner as they would be within a residential facility. At a client's home, the environmental conditions can present social service employees exposure to slick surfaces from snow, ice or rain as well as stairways and entrances. Within the home, there may be additional STF hazards from household items, toys, furniture and wet floors in the restroom or kitchen areas. Loose area rugs and other floor coverings can also be hazardous for workers and for patients.

To avoid these types of injuries, workers should be trained about fall protection and actions they can take to identify and reduce fall hazards for themselves and their clients. General recommendations include:

- Wear sturdy, flat shoes with good slip protection.
- Walk slowly and conscientiously on icy or wet surfaces.
- Examine the client's walking path to the bathrooms, eating areas and sitting areas:
 - Remove or securely tape down rugs using double-sided tape if the client gives permission to do so.
 - Secure cords and any other loose materials in the walking path that could cause the patient or a worker to slip, trip or stumble.
- Use handrails.
- Turn on outside lights before returning to your car in the dark.
- Clean up spills as soon as they happen.

