

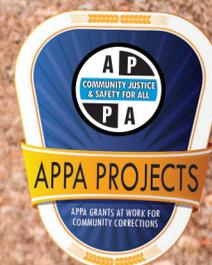
# PRACTICAL ACTION TIPS ON OFFICER SAFETY FOR TRIBAL PROBATION PERSONNEL

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## INTRODUCTION

As a community supervision officer working in Indian Country, you have been trained that your goal is to maintain public safety and work with individuals on supervision in your community to change their behavior. Unfortunately, your job does not come with the luxury of getting to choose who gets placed on your caseload; you are expected to work with every individual the court gives you. Some of the individuals you work with will pose no significant threat to your safety; however, there is the potential that at some point during the supervision

*“...community corrections personnel work in a volatile and potentially dangerous environment which requires that individuals and their agencies take every precaution to protect staff in the office and in the field.”*

*- APPA Position Statement on Staff Safety*

process, someone you supervise will pose a threat to your safety. Additionally, it's not always the individual on supervision you have to be weary of; in many situations, it is the spouse, significant other, family member, friend, neighbor, or even pet that could be the hazard.

Many tribal probation officers do not have access to the necessary equipment to remain safe both in the office and in the field. However, it is not just ballistic vests, electronic control devices, and guns that will keep you safe. There are things you can do to be proactive in maintaining your personal safety when faced with potentially threatening situations. This bulletin will provide you with some *practical action steps* you can take to make sure you are safe both in your office and out in the field.

## THERE IS ALWAYS RISK

There is no argument that probation officers in general deal with a population of individuals who can put officers in serious, and many times fatal, situations. Unfortunately, there is no unified data collection system regarding the number of probation and parole officers harmed or killed in the line of duty.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence-based practice stresses the importance of identifying each individual's risk level and developing supervision conditions and goals that address that perceived risk. However, when it comes to officer safety, when encountering an individual under supervision in your office, at their place of employment, or at their home, you

should always assume that every individual poses an *'unknown risk'* regardless of if the field contact was planned or unannounced.

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<sup>1</sup> The American Probation & Parole Association issued a Resolution in September of 2005 urging the Federal Bureau of Investigations Criminal Justice Information Services Division that “probation, parole, and community service officers be included in the Unified Crime Reporting statistics for law enforcement officers killed or assaulted in the line of duty”. See the full resolution here: [http://www.appa-net.org/eweb/Dynamicpage.aspx?site=APPA\\_2&web-code=IB\\_Resolution&wps\\_key=e26a3a72-d00e-4166-b1b6-0505e81d38f8](http://www.appa-net.org/eweb/Dynamicpage.aspx?site=APPA_2&web-code=IB_Resolution&wps_key=e26a3a72-d00e-4166-b1b6-0505e81d38f8).

## FACTORS THAT COULD INFLUENCE A DANGEROUS SITUATION

*Danger instigated by the individual on supervision:* It is unlikely you will be able to always predict the emotional or mental state of the individual during a field or office contact. For example, you do not know the kind of day the individual had (e.g. did they get yelled at by their boss at work, lose their job, get in a fight with their spouse/significant other, get a speeding ticket), are they under the influence of drugs/alcohol at the time of your encounter, did they forget to take medicine to address mental health issues, do they think you are there to arrest them or violate them, etc. These examples and a thousand other scenarios could influence whether your appearance is greeted as an extra irritation or the “straw that broke the camel’s back” resulting in an altercation.

*Danger instigated by other individuals on the scene:* When making a contact at the individual’s home or place of employment, it is impossible to predict who else may be on the scene when you arrive. In many situations, it is not the individual under supervision who poses the threat or instigates an altercation, but the spouse, significant other, friend, or family member of that individual that initiates a confrontation.

## DANGER IS INHERENT IN THE WORK OF COMMUNITY SUPERVISION



Data is limited on the number of incidents causing harm or death among community supervision officers. In 1993, the Federal Probation & Pretrial Officers Association conducted a limited study (48 percent of agencies responded, not inclusive of major metropolitan agencies which chose not to respond). Their data showed that:

- Offender caused the harm to the officer in 45 percent of the cases;
- Another person caused the harm to the officer in 35 percent of the cases;
- 56 percent of the incidents occurred in the field;
- 28 percent of the incidents occurred in the office.

Administrative Officers of the United States Court (2001, December). Arming Probation Officers: Enhancing Public Confidence and Officer Safety. *Federal Probation*, (65)3; pgs. 24-28.

*Danger instigated by neighbors:* Anecdotally, many tribal probation officers indicate they are not equipped with uniforms, badges, or vehicles that properly identify them as probation officers. Therefore, they are often misidentified as possible intruders by neighbors when approaching the home of an individual on supervision. In some situations, this has led to probation officers being chased off the property and even fired upon by neighbors.

Conversely, there have been situations when tribal probation officers have had the proper identifying equipment, yet have encountered the same type of situations because the neighbors are doing something unlawful and do not want probation officers coming into contact with their activities.

As an officer, you should always be prepared for not only what you may encounter on the probationer's property, but also among his/her neighbors.

*Danger instigated by pets:* In many situations, probationers' pets can be seen as a potential hazard to probation officers conducting a home contact. Many individuals have dogs for protection, especially in rural areas. As a condition of probation, individuals on community supervision are prohibited from possessing firearms or other weapons; therefore, dogs are becoming a more common means of protection. Pets can pose just as big a threat to you as a gun, knife, or other typical weapon.

## **BE PROACTIVE IN PROTECTING YOUR SAFETY**

The good news is, your safety is determined just as much, if not more, by you being proactive and mentally prepared than any equipment you wear or carry.

### **IN THE OFFICE**

- Mentally prepare yourself prior to each meeting with a probationer. Review what you have to discuss with him/her prior to the meeting. If you have to discuss something unpleasant with them, such as a violation issue or why they have not met a goal or condition, be prepared for the variety of ways they may react. Also, prepare yourself for the likelihood they may just generally arrive in a foul mood, particularly if they have exhibited unsavory feelings about having to come see you.
- If possible, it is becoming a practice of many probation departments to have a "sterile" room where officers can meet with probationers. This room is void of anything more than a desk and two chairs to minimize the likelihood of an altercation. This type of meeting space also minimizes the likelihood of an individual on supervision getting a glimpse of someone else's information or possibly identifying personal information about you that could prove damaging later.
- If the "sterile" room is not possible, don't worry. There are still some things you can do to be proactive in protecting yourself during an office contact.
  - ✦ Clear your desk. This includes any items that could be used as a weapon (staplers, tape dispensers, telephones, pencils/pens, picture frames, binders, desk lamps, knickknacks, etc.).

- ✦ Protect your personal information. Keep pictures of family members and things that provide personal information about you or your family out of client's sight. This includes photographs, pictures that your kids/grandkids, nieces/nephews have given you, diplomas/training certificates, or any information that could give the individual personal or background information about you. What may seem trivial to you can be a source of vital information for an individual who may intend to do you or your family harm.
- Make it a practice to escort probationers and other visitors into and out of your office. Have the probationer walk in front of you. Never turn your back on the probationer when entering/leaving your office, walking down the hallway, or entering/leaving the reception area.
- As soon as you make visual contact with the probationer, pay close attention to his/her appearance. For example, are they wearing clothing that could hide a weapon (such as inappropriate clothing for the weather such as an overcoat or a heavy sweatshirt in the summer, baggy pants or baggy shirts, etc.). Additionally, always ask him/her to remove any hats prior to walking them back to your office. Many probation departments have gone so far as to develop requirements that probationers cannot wear certain things when they come to court or to an office contact (such as gang colors or gang attire, hats, bulky clothing, or be "sagging" (where the pants hang below their waist). While this seems like an extreme condition of probation to enforce, it is designed to protect you. If they show up at court or at an office contact in violation of this condition, you can refuse to meet with them, impose a sanction, and tell them to return when they are compliant.
- Once inside your office, keep windows to the outside clear (this includes windows on doors to an internal hallway) to allow other staff to see in as they pass by. If your office does not have a window, keep the door open all the way or cracked open if the individual requests privacy. If they balk at having the door cracked open, tell him/her it is policy to not have doors closed all the way.
- It is good practice to schedule appointments with individuals only when a co-worker can be in the office area with you. Establish a code word or code phrase for your agency that will send a signal to your co-workers that something is not right but will not alert the individual that you are calling for help (e.g., asking a coworker for the orange file). Establish a procedure for what should happen when that code word or code phrase is used (for example, the co-worker notifies law enforcement or interrupts the meeting to diffuse the situation).
- Be aware of technology. In this age of camera phones and other miniaturized equipment, make sure you don't have any items or documents in your office that you would not want to be photographed by a probationer or other visitor. Additionally, be aware that the probationer may be recording you without your knowledge.

## IN THE FIELD: MENTALLY PREPARE

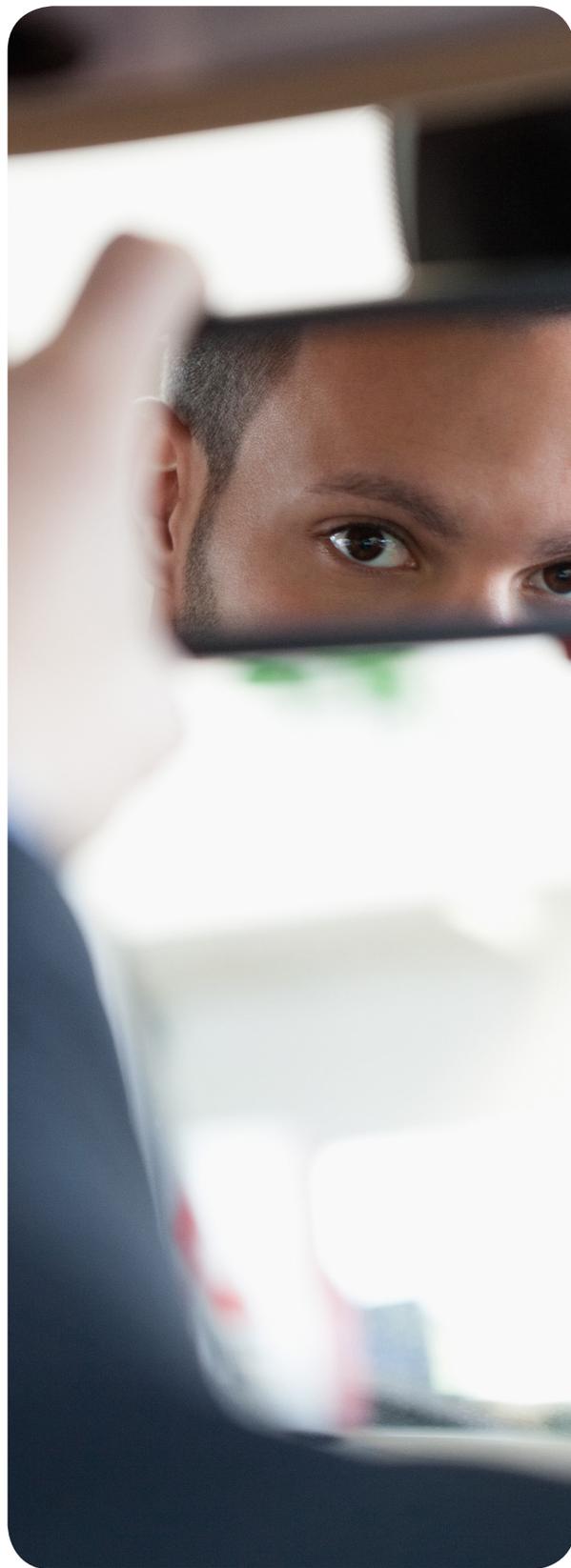
Just as with an office visit, it is important to mentally prepare prior to making a field contact.

- Review the case file and determine the purpose of the contact. Is it to just check in with the individual, confirm residency, to check on compliance with conditions, or to execute a warrant or violation/revocation. Each of these scenarios can have a variety of outcomes and mentally preparing for potential conflict can improve your chances of the contact going smoothly.
- Do not assume that announced contacts will carry less risk than unannounced contacts; both carry inherent risks. With announced contacts, if the individual intended to do you harm (possibly because they knew you were coming to arrest them), they will be prepared for you. With unannounced contacts, you may unknowingly catch the individual doing something they should not be doing and that can also lead to a potentially dangerous situation for you.
- It is good practice to conduct home contacts in pairs, such as with another probation officer or a law enforcement officer. There is safety in numbers.
- It is good practice to alert someone to the fact that you will be in the field, where you will be (such as the address) and how long you should be gone. You may have to travel to remote areas for home contacts where dispatch or cell signals are not available. Therefore, alerting individuals at the office of your whereabouts is a good habit to develop and implement as standard practice. If you are not back or have not made contact in the allotted time, initiate a procedure where they check on you (a drive by or call check-in procedure).
- Do not assume that daytime field contacts are safer than nighttime field contacts. Actually, data shows that the majority of officers killed have been on field contacts between the hours of 8 A.M and 5 P.M. You should be as mentally prepared during daytime hours as you would during nighttime hours when making field contacts.



## IN THE FIELD: VEHICLE SAFETY

- If possible, it is important to use a tribal vehicle that clearly identifies you as a probation officer rather than your personal vehicle. Individuals on supervision (or their family, friends, neighbors) may take note of your personal vehicle information. If they know what your car looks like, you could be targeted for vandalism. In addition, just like personal information in your office, probationers or their friends and family can use information such as your license plate number to track down your address to cause you or your family personal harm. If your agency cannot afford a vehicle specific to the probation department, ask law enforcement to assist you with home contacts.
- Keep your vehicle equipped for an emergency (spare tire, car jack, first aid kit, warning devices such as flares, flashlights, and emergency equipment specific to your area (snow shovel/scrapper, blankets, food/water) in case of a breakdown in a remote area.
- If traveling in an unfamiliar area, pay careful attention to your surroundings. Is there a public place or other place you can go to conceal your location in the event you are chased off the property.
- Do not use your cell phone or other electronic devices when approaching a probationer's home. If you are using these types of devices, you will be distracted and may miss warning signs that there are potential dangers ahead.
- Use your senses (sight, smell, and hearing) to scan the locations surrounding the probationer's home. Make note of unfamiliar cars or people, if possible.
- Stay conscious of your surroundings; be alert to possible hiding places, including shrubs, vehicles and outbuildings. Be aware that people may be watching you, although you may not see them.
- Be aware of potential hazards: cameras, alarms, dogs, chemicals for making drugs.





## ARMING TRIBAL PROBATION OFFICERS

Choosing to arm tribal probation officers or not (and deciding which weapons probation officers will have access to) is a decision that each jurisdiction needs to make. Some agencies indicate that they choose to arm their probation officers because:

- More serious offenders are being supervised in the community than ever before;
- Many agencies are encouraging more out-of-the-office supervision strategies;
- Probationers have easier access to weapons now than in the past; and
- Tribal probation officers are supervising individuals in remote or dangerous areas (e.g. neighborhoods of known gang activity).

However, other tribes (whose officers face these same challenges) choose not to arm their probation officers saying it would send a negative message to the probationers and community, it contradicts their historical heritage of non-violence, or their officers do not do much field work.

The American Probation & Parole Association (APPA) does not support nor oppose the arming of probation officers but supports individual agencies in making the best decision for their officers, agency and community. To see APPA's Recommendations for agencies that decide to arm their officers, please see the position statement on "Weapons" here.

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*“Once this decision is made, the agency must dictate all choices as to equipment, training, and procedures related to carrying a weapon. Nothing should be left to the discretion of individual officers except perhaps whether or not they want to accept an assignment which requires the carrying of a weapon. Standards must be established and monitored closely for compliance.”* -APPA Position Statement “Weapons”, January, 1994

## CONCLUSION

As a tribal probation officer, your position puts you in contact with individuals who may cause you harm. It is important to prepare yourself prior to each meeting with an individual, whether in the office or in the field, with the knowledge and skills to protect yourself. It is important for you to take a proactive approach to ensure you are prepared to defend yourself when confrontational or dangerous situations arise. Beyond having tangible protection, such as weapons, it is essential to avail yourself to information and training on how to mentally prepare yourself with skills and tools to avoid/handle confrontation and incidents. While this bulletin is not exhaustive in the guidance given on officer safety, it does provide you with some *practical action steps* you can take to help you be proactive in ensuring you do everything you can to get home safely every day.



## WANT MORE INFORMATION OR TRAINING ON OFFICER SAFETY?



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The American Probation & Parole Association (APPA), in cooperation with the Community Corrections Institute (CCI), developed an online training course (i.e., *Exercising Caution in Probation and Parole: Strategies to Enhance Officer Safety*) for community supervision personnel. You can access more information on this online training course here <http://appa.cequick.com/Exercising-Caution-in-Probation-and-Parole-Strategies-to-Enhance-Officer-Safety.aspx>

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