# FIRE FIGHTERS GUIDANCE NOTE # 5-2

## ISSUE: MINIMUM SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS FOR WORKING ALONE

Under clause 25(2)(h) of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA), employers are required to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker. Clause 25(2)(a) of the OHSA requires employers to provide information, instruction, and supervision to a worker to protect the health or safety of the worker.

This Guidance Note is intended to provide guidance for fire service personnel working alone such as Fire Prevention Officers, Fire Investigators, Fire Inspectors and others while performing field work alone.

Fire departments should, in consultation with their Joint Health and Safety Committee or Health and Safety Representative, incorporate into their SOPs/OGs the principles set out in this Guidance Note.

Employers should have programs in place that include but are not limited to:

* Having a check-in/check-out procedure in place. Whether by cell phone or radio, to a supervisor or dispatch centre, employers should strive to know the location of their employees in the field at all times.
* Having a predetermined response to distress calls from workers in the field.
* Providing training and education in how to recognize and avoid potentially violent situations, as well as conflict resolution and mediation.
* Providing procedures to follow if an assault takes place.
* Allowing the use of a "buddy system" in actual or potentially high risk situations.
* Providing information on high risk geographical areas to all staff.
* Limiting the time of day visits can be made to high risk areas/clients.
* Keeping client records and ensure staff are aware of clients known to be aggressive, hostile or potentially violent.
* Considering requiring the preparation of a daily work plan so everyone, especially supervisors, know where and when workers are expected to be located.

Employees working on field calls such as serving official documents or conducting enforcement activities should:

* Access all available information about a client before meeting with them.
* Arrange to meet clients in a 'safe' environment where other people are around, such as a restaurant, hotel lobby, or their office/workplace if at all possible.
* Wear comfortable, professional clothing and practical shoes which will enable you to leave quickly if necessary.
* Always wear or carry your identification badge. It will show that you are acting in an official capacity and that you are an employee doing your job.
* Carry only what is necessary. Large or numerous bags or cases are cumbersome.
* Always take a cell phone and or radio if provided and keep it in an accessible location.
* Be alert and make mental notes of your surroundings when you arrive at a new place. Know where the exits are at all times.
* Avoid allowing the client to come between you and your exit. Direct their movements if necessary.
* Maintain a 'reactionary gap' between yourself and the client (e.g., out of reach of the average person's kicking distance). Increase the gap by sitting across from each other at a table, if possible.
* If you are referring to written material, bring two copies so that you can sit across from the client. Avoid sitting beside a client.
* Ask a colleague or "buddy" to come with you if something makes you feel uneasy. Tell your supervisor about any feelings of discomfort or apprehension about an up-coming meeting.
* Keep records and indicate if the client is known to be aggressive, hostile or potentially violent. Do not leave out incidents that make you feel apprehensive.

Do Not:

* Enter any situation or location where you feel threatened or unsafe.
* Remain in any situation or location that you feel has become or has the potential to become threatening or unsafe.
* Carry weapons of any type, including pepper spray. Weapons can be easily used against you and are typically illegal.
* Post or announce your official schedule on social media.
* Hesitate to call for Police assistance.

Employees conducting fire investigation activities should:

* Report to Incident Command and follow the command structure during active fire ground operations.
* Follow all safety procedures established by the employer (i.e. wearing of personal protective equipment, accountability, electrical safety, etc.).

The following high risk activities that may be required during a fire investigation should be avoided when working alone:

* Working at heights or in elevator shafts.
* In confined spaces (e.g. tanks, industrial dust collectors, hoppers and bins, agricultural silos, culverts, etc.).
* With electricity or with de-energized or locked out/tagged out equipment.
* With hazardous substances or materials.
* With hazardous equipment such as chainsaws.
* With materials at great pressure.
* With the public, where there is a potential for violence.

References:

GN # 2-2 The Buddy System

GN # 6-13 Violence and Harassment in the Workplace

Canadian Center for Occupational Safety and Health - Working Alone

<http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/workingalone.html>