

Dealing with Difficult Clients Guidelines

1. Purpose

Inala Community House expects a high standard of services provided to clients whether in person or on the phone. ICH recognises the importance of ensuring that workers are not subjected to angry or abusive behaviour. These guidelines have been developed to give workers some guidance when dealing with difficult clients.

2. Scope

These guidelines provide guidance to all workers at Inala Community House.

3. Guidelines

ICH is committed to ensuring that all workers are safe while at work. ICH has a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to aggressive or abusive behaviour and recognises the impact that this behaviour can have on workers.

Angry vs. Aggressive/Abusive

There is a difference between an angry person and an aggressive/abusive person. A significant part of assessing whether a person is angry or aggressive/abusive is the observation of their tone, body language, their manner and language used. This difference can be quite difficult at times to tell but workers should remain calm and end the conversation (if possible) where they feel that the behaviour is aggressive/abusive.

An angry person may complain about the organisations policies, procedures or services but this is not directed towards the worker. They may say things such as:

- That is a stupid policy
- Your program is rubbish
- I don't know why you can't just...

An aggressive or abusive person will direct their manner of speaking, language used and/or behaviour towards the worker. Workers are not expected to tolerate abuse or aggression. Examples of this may include:

- Swearing
- Shouting
- Name-calling
- Threatening
- Or other abusive or aggressive language or behaviour

Guidelines for Dealing with Angry Client

An angry client has the potential to damage the reputation of the organisation and of the services provided. They are more likely to disengage from interacting with workers, the services or organisation. An effective handling of an angry client however has the potential to build a positive relationship through the use of several key factors:

- Be aware of the warning signs, this can be indicated by keywords such as 'issue', 'problem', 'payment', 'slow', 'unhappy', 'complaint' or other words as relevant to each service. These keywords can indicate that there is some issue which the client has faced.
- Provide a prompt response. Angry clients are more likely to be impatient while waiting for a response. Where possible, talk to the person rather than email or text as this minimises the chance of a misunderstanding and personalises the conversation.
- Be self-aware and moderate tone and body language. Stay calm. Speak slowly, assertively and politely.
- Discover the issue by letting them talk or vent. Listen to what they are saying and affirm what they are saying (i.e. "Yes I can understand your frustration with..." or "Just to confirm you have experienced an issue with..." or "Thank you for reporting this issue regarding...").
- Apologise whether at fault or not. Conveying a sincere apology acknowledges the client's anger and frustration. Be sincere in the communication.
- Be honest and accountable. If there is fault admit it. Explain what issues can be resolved and what timeframes will apply. If an issue will need to be investigated, explain that they will be contacted as soon as possible with a solution. Be transparent and realistic in what is said.

Escalation

An angry person can escalate to being aggressive/abusive and there are some flags which workers can listen for or observe including:

- Speech: using sarcasm, increase in volume, swearing, tone
- Body language: facial expressions, eye contact, restlessness/agitation, clenching jaw or fists
- Encroaching on personal space or looming over the worker
- Displaying or threatening with a weapon
- Appearance can also be an indication that a client may be more likely to become aggressive/abusive such as where they may appear intoxicated/under the influence

Dealing with Aggressive/Abusive Clients

On the Phone

If attempts to deal with an angry caller have failed and they become abusive or aggressive:

- Stay calm and do not respond to their behaviour
- Inform the caller that you will not be able to continue the call if they continue the behaviour (i.e. 'I understand that you are frustrated but I cannot continue the call while you are shouting/swearing at me.')
- If the caller still does not calm down, inform the caller that you are hanging up (i.e. 'I am going to hang up the phone, if you would like to make a complaint please do so in writing and direct it towards... Goodbye.'). Hang up.
- Workers should notify their Manager and the Admin team (or other persons who may receive the call) via email that if this person calls that they are to either:
 - be put through to the same person or a senior workers member
 - that messages are to be taken

In Person

Workers should:

- Stay calm and speak normally
- Be respectful and try to restore a sense of justice for the person by explaining options and encouraging them to try these
- Assess the situation
- Ensure that posture remains passive and non-threatening with hands by the side and palms facing forward
- Let them vent their frustration
- Ask open-ended questions and keep the conversation going
- Maintain a position close to the door
- Ensure that they do not stand too close to an aggressive or abusive person and try to use objects to create distance (e.g. a desk or counter) between yourself and the other person
- Leave an unsafe environment (where possible)
- Follow the emergency procedures where feeling unsafe.

Other workers should not become an audience, however they should monitor the situation in case of it escalating.

Workers should not:

- Challenge the client whether through voice, manner or arguing
- Shout
- Ignore abusive, threats or aggression
- Turn their back on the client
- Stay in an unsafe environment
- Disarm or fight the client

It is important that workers, in dealing with difficult clients are aware of their own reactions. Signs of anxiety, frustration or unease can be conveyed through tone, speech and body language. These can result in escalating the situation.

Reporting

Workers should complete an incident report and email this to HR. Where necessary, client files should be updated to include an aggressive/abusive warning.

The Manager shall ensure that the worker is supported through this process and seek ways to prevent any harm or future harm. This may include debriefing, encouraging access to EAP or other support services, changing workers or communication methods, risk management strategies or in severe cases withdrawal of services (for funded services this shall occur in accordance with any service requirements).

If necessary, the initial worker or a senior worker shall call back at a later time to discuss the issues when the caller has had the opportunity to calm down.

4. Related Documents

Policies

ICH Workplace Health and Safety Policy
ICH Risk Management Policy
ICH Personal Safety in the Community Policy
ICH Workplace Violence Policy

Procedures

ICH Incident Management Procedure

Forms

ICH Incident Reporting Forms