

**From:** [DCF BWF Work Programs Help Desk](#)  
**To:** [DCF DL DFES BWF W-2 Agency Directors](#); [DCF DL DFES BWF W-2 Agency CARES Coordinators](#); [DCF DL DFES BWF TJ TMJ](#)  
**Cc:** [DCF DL DFES PTT W-2 Staff](#); [DCF DL DFES BWF W-2 REGIONAL STAFF](#); [DCF DL DFES BWF Supervisors](#)  
**Subject:** COVID-19 Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health  
**Date:** Thursday, April 23, 2020 7:05:28 AM  
**Attachments:** [NNEDV\\_Email+Best+Practices\\_2018.pdf](#)  
[NNEDV\\_Phone+Communication+Best+Practices\\_2019.pdf](#)  
[NNEDV\\_Texting+Best+Practices\\_2019.pdf](#)

---

Hello.

W-2 agencies already support families in several ways, but additional supports may be needed during this time due to the increased likelihood of domestic violence in periods of crisis. As policy updates and clarifications continue to guide W-2 agencies during COVID-19, it is important to consider the impact of the pandemic on victims and survivors of domestic violence, and on individuals facing trauma or mental health problems. This e-mail recommends strategies to support individuals and families facing domestic violence, trauma, or mental health problems.

## **1. Background and General Information**

-  
Low-income families are undoubtedly experiencing incredible stresses related to COVID-19. Current data show that people in poverty often disproportionately feel the stresses of crisis. Unfortunately, increased stress is also a breeding ground for increased *frequency* and *intensity* of domestic violence, trauma, and mental health problems. This escalation can include all forms of domestic abuse, including, but not limited to physical, emotional, verbal, and financial abuse. Loss of health, employment, or other necessities can lead to increased trauma and re-traumatization for individuals and families. Research also shows that mental health is impacted in times of crisis, resulting in increased depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts or actions, and other troubling responses to trauma and abuse.

## **2. Recommendations for Additional Support from W-2 Agencies**

-  
While W-2 agencies already have practices in place to support applicants and participants experiencing domestic violence, trauma, or mental health problems, the following recommendations offer additional considerations when working with families during crises. These recommendations are meant to supplement supports already provided in the W-2 manual and policy updates.

### *a. Communications*

#### 1. Domestic Violence

While W-2 agencies continue to communicate with applicants and participants on the

phone, via text, or in emails, victims of domestic violence may not be able to communicate at certain times during crises. For that reason, agency workers may modify phone communications to start like this:

“Hi, I’m \_\_\_\_\_ (your name) with \_\_\_\_\_ (your agency name). Are you able to talk privately with me now?” If yes, follow with: “If something changes and you need to hang up, you can call me back directly at this number \_\_\_\_\_.”

If no, consider asking the person if there would be a more appropriate time. If there is not an appropriate time, leave your phone number and email address, so the individual can choose to contact you when it is safe. You may also consider asking the individual if email, texting, or another platform would be more appropriate.

Mail communications may also be difficult for victims of domestic violence to access during the pandemic. Even if someone is part of the Safe at Home confidential mailing address program, the individual may be unable to retrieve or read mail privately during crises. Sometimes perpetrators are part of the W-2 group, but sometimes they are not. Victims may feel unsafe to communicate over the phone, or through email and mail during crises, especially if the perpetrator is unaware of the individual’s program application or participation. W-2 and other programs can be an avenue for victims to leave dangerous situations once employment and finances are secure. If domestic violence is indicated through assessment or other communications, the worker should consider keeping the case open even if there is less communication with the participant than usual.

Based on the conversation, if the worker chooses to provide additional domestic violence information to an applicant or participant, the worker should first determine the appropriate way to provide information that will keep the individual safe.

Attached to this document are three additional resources with best practices for electronic communication from the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV).

## 2. Trauma & Mental Health

Knowing that trauma and mental health problems may increase during crises, agency workers should consider adding questions to their communications. Here are some examples:

- “How are you feeling about your situation? What emotions are you experiencing?”
- “Who is supporting you during this time? How can I help you find more support?”

- “What strategies are you using to stay connected with other people?”

If the participant does not respond to open-ended questions, the worker should consider saying something like, “I am feeling very \_\_\_\_\_ (emotion) during this time. Do you feel this way? Tell me about your feelings.” While open-ended questions better allow individuals to express thoughts, a little prompting may be necessary.

Agency workers should also consider their responses when someone answers these questions. Research recommends not starting a response with, “I know how you feel.” This phrase can create additional separation and isolation, because everyone’s experiences are different. In addition, avoid phrases like, “That must make you feel (emotion).” This minimizes the individual’s feelings and can lead to decreased responses to questions.

Instead, the worker can respond with something like, “Thank you for sharing that with me. How can we work together to help make things better?”

## *b. Assessments*

### 1. Domestic Violence

The WWP informal assessment driver flow provides questions about domestic violence situations. However, W-2 workers should ask additional questions during crises even if the individual did not disclose domestic violence during recent assessments. Workers may ask questions like:

- “Who is at home with you? How is that relationship?”
- “How do you think \_\_\_\_\_ (your husband, partner, child, etc.) is feeling right now? Why do you think so?”
- “Has anything changed regarding safety in your home since we last talked?”

Workers can use open-ended questions to elicit honest and real feedback from the applicant or participant. Workers should try not to pressure a response; instead, workers should provide an opportunity for the individual to speak freely.

### 2. Trauma & Mental Health

Similar to strategies used to discuss domestic violence, workers can add questions about emotions or actions in communications with applicants and participants. Even if the individual did not report substance abuse, addiction, traumatic experiences, or mental health problems during previous assessments, worker should engage the individuals in dialogue about experiences and feelings during the crisis.

Formal assessments as well as mental health supports and treatments may be limited during crises. Agencies should all previous policy guidance regarding assessments. Workers can use any delays in accessing formal assessments or supportive services to engage the individual in self-reflection, conversations about self-care, or other engaging activities.

*c. Activity Assignments*

1. Domestic Violence

Victims of domestic violence may not be able to complete W-2 activities during crises. A perpetrator may create barriers for a participant's involvement in the program as a form of abuse. Agencies should use W-2 policy discretion when considering good cause for activity assignments for individuals experiencing domestic violence.

2. Trauma & Mental Health

Workers should consider assigning activities that support trauma survivors or those with mental health problems. Such activities include:

- Motivate someone to connect with others or practice healthy, daily routines
- Engage interaction between parent and child
- Promote reflection and dreams for the future
- Encourage self-care and independent living

*d. Other considerations*

When using these recommendations, safety is most important. It is unlikely that a W-2 worker can "fix" a domestic violence, trauma, or mental health problem. The W-2 worker's job is to support.

For more information about domestic violence services, workers can contact End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin ([www.endabusewi.org](http://www.endabusewi.org)) and local domestic violence organizations to ensure the agency is providing accurate information on how to support survivors during the pandemic. Shelters are still open, and in cases where they are full, many cities are turning to hotels for space. For a list of all DV agencies in Wisconsin, go to:

<https://www.endabuse.wi.org/get-help/>

Agencies serving Dane County residents should note that although the Dane County Circuit Court records office may be temporarily closed to the public, restraining orders can be filed online.

Statewide legal resource organizations such as Legal Action ([www.legalaction.org](http://www.legalaction.org)), Judicare

([www.judicare.org](http://www.judicare.org)), and End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin can provide legal assistance, including helping with technology.

DCF is also expected to provide a list of domestic violence resources on its public-facing website. We will send an announcement through the W-2 Help Desk when this list is available.

This email and the attached documents will be posted to the BWF Work Programs Help Desk Home Page located here: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/w2/partners/toolbox/helpdesk> and can be found in the Common Requests section under **COVID-19 Information**.

If you have any questions, please contact Sara Conrad at [sara.conrad@wisconsin.gov](mailto:sara.conrad@wisconsin.gov).

Thank you.

**Sara Conrad**

*Program and Policy Analyst, Advanced*

Department of Children and Families

---

201 East Washington Avenue

Madison, WI 53703

*T:* (269) 470-0996 (personal cell, only during work hours)

*E:* [sara.conrad@wisconsin.gov](mailto:sara.conrad@wisconsin.gov)