



North Carolina Real Estate Agent

SAFETY GUIDE

NORTH CAROLINA REAL ESTATE AGENT SAFETY GUIDE

This booklet is published as a cooperative venture of the North Carolina Association of REALTORS® and the North Carolina Real Estate Commission.

A SPECIAL THANKS:

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PREFACE

Real estate sales and rental agents routinely find themselves in situations where they are alone with clients or customers about whom they have very little information. The very nature of showing real estate to prospective buyers and tenants who are virtual strangers can make agents, both men and women, susceptible to becoming victims of violent crimes.

Hundreds of real estate professionals have been murdered while on the job throughout the United States. Many more have been raped, beaten, robbed or attacked by animals.

Recognizing the need for greater attention to real estate agent safety, the North Carolina Association of REALTORS® and the North Carolina Real Estate Commission agreed to cooperate in promoting the education of real estate licensees about agent safety. Through the leadership of the REALTOR® Association's North Carolina Real Estate Safety Council, this safety guide was published to assist in this educational effort. This guide contains some common sense safety tips that have been compiled from crime victims and real estate associations across the country.

The North Carolina Real Estate Safety Council encourages every real estate firm to implement a formal safety program. Each company should implement procedures and education programs that include everyone in the office. This booklet is intended as a resource for designing your safety program and, together with links to Internet safety training programs, should be made readily available and easily accessible to agents and staff members. Moreover, every real estate agent can and should individually utilize the safety tips addressed in this guide to practice in a safe manner, even if your company does not have a formal safety program.

Don't be a crime statistic. Use this safety guide and make personal safety your first priority.

ORDERING INFORMATION

This booklet may be purchased by accessing the following websites and following the instructions provided for obtaining the agent safety guide:

- North Carolina Association of REALTORS®:
www.ncrealtors.org
- North Carolina Real Estate Commission:
www.ncrec.gov

INTRODUCTION

In Iredell County, a real estate agent was contacted by a stranger asking her to appraise his home. She agreed and went alone to his home for the 8:00 p.m. appointment. It was later learned that he had given the agent a false name and false telephone number. Although the agent's body was never found, a jury convicted him of second-degree murder.

Unfortunately, incidents like this aren't rare — and they don't only happen to women.

Consider the following incidents:

- Arkansas broker Beverly Carter vanished after going to meet a prospective buyer at a house in a small Arkansas community. Her abandoned SUV was found in the driveway; fake texts were sent from her phone to her husband indicating that she was out with friends. In reality, she had been murdered and left in a shallow grave at a construction site. Her cell phone helped authorities find her body.

- A real estate agent in Cary was raped while showing a house. She showed one property to the attacker without incident. He then asked that she take him to a second, smaller property. Once inside the second house, the man assaulted her. The broker was afraid to call police afterward because the attacker threatened to “come back and get her” if she did, but a friend reported the incident and the man was arrested and convicted of sexual battery.

- An 84-year-old real estate agent buzzed two men into his real estate office building. The men had asked about renting a home but the agent told him it was unavailable. One man then reportedly pulled a gun while the other tied the agent to his desk chair. The men stole money from the agent's pockets and ripped the phone off his desk before leaving, police reported. The victim was not injured.

- Sometimes female perpetrators are involved. For example, a Durham agent was targeted by a couple who were supposedly getting married. After talking with them for several months on the phone and meeting them face-to-face in her office, the agent agreed to a listing appointment alone at the man's house, where she was beaten and almost raped. Luckily, she was able to convince the attacker to let her go, telling him she would not report the incident to police. She later learned that the buyers had given her fictitious names and had planned the attack together after picking her out of a real estate magazine.

Unfortunately, stories like these are becoming all too common. Whether you are a man or a woman, live in a small town

or metropolitan area, you are at risk. These alarming examples are used to illustrate the importance of taking simple precautions as you go through your workday. You can substantially reduce your risk of becoming a victim of a violent crime by following the safety tips presented in this guide.

By following the four basic safety practices listed below, you can make a difference. These are things you can do on your own, even if your office does not have a formal safety program.

Summary of Basic Safety Practices

1. Identify the person you are working with before you join him or her alone, in a car or a house. Preferably meet him or her at your office, copy his or her driver's license and make sure someone from your office knows where you'll be going with the person.
2. Always carry your cell phone with you and make sure it is fully charged and has reception. Program 911 into speed dial and don't hesitate to call for help. Make sure your method of communication utilizes the most current technology.
3. Trust your instincts. If you have a bad feeling, don't second-guess what it's telling you. Listen to your gut feeling and protect yourself.
4. Never assume you are safe.

Organization of Safety Guide

This guide contains 12 general safety tips with numerous, more specific tips for each of the 12 general tips, followed by a section on Office Safety Procedures that includes some suggested forms for use as part of a safety program.

SAFETY TIP #1 — KNOW WHO YOU ARE DEALING WITH WHEN YOU HAVE NEW CLIENTS OR CUSTOMERS:

- Meet them at your office
- Take their picture
- Photocopy their driver's license
- Get their car description and license number
- Verify their identity
- Conduct an Internet search through Google® and/or social media

Meet Them in Your Office First

Ask the prospective client to meet at your office before going to a property. This provides a safe, neutral first meeting place where you can openly collect and file identifying information. This may discourage an assailant.

If you can't get them to come into the office first and you

still want to work with them, consider asking an associate to accompany you. At a minimum, let someone in your office know with whom you are meeting, where and when. When the client or customer arrives at the property, note the make, model, color and license number of their vehicle or take a picture of it. Email or text this information to your office before you proceed.

Photocopy or Scan Their Driver's License

Legitimate clients do not mind you copying their driver's license or photo identification, and they also shouldn't mind if you take a picture on your phone for your file. Be sure to email or text it to your office, a friend, or your family. We freely show our license to the clerk at the store when we use a credit card. It is reasonable to expect identification from a prospective client before we show a home worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Verify Their Identity

Run a Google[®] or similar search and check social media sites like Facebook[®], Twitter[®], and LinkedIn[®]. Consider calling references, their place of employment, and verifying their current address. One crime victim suggested using an Internet site providing criminal background checks to check out a prospective client for criminal records before working with them. (For a list of companies that have asked to be on *NCcourts.org*, go to *nccourts.org/Citizens/GoToCourt/Documents/cbcccompanies.pdf*).

Introduce the Prospect to Someone in Your Office

A would-be assailant does not like to be noticed by others, knowing such persons could pick him or her out of a police lineup.

SAFETY TIP #2 — TELL SOMEONE

- Who you are with
- Where you are going
- When you will be back

Know who your co-workers are. Especially in larger offices, it is important to meet your fellow agents and workers to assure that the persons walking the halls are supposed to be there. Make sure you tell someone where you are going, who you are going with and when you will be back. Whenever possible, make sure the client knows you have shared this information with someone. You are less likely to be attacked if the criminal knows you will be missed and he or she can be identified. Even leaving behind a note on your desk could help the authorities find you in an emergency situation.

When possible, use an Agent Itinerary Form in a shared calendar or file to communicate your schedule with the office staff or others (see example on page 16). If your client is with you as you leave the office, make a show of sharing your schedule with someone by text or email. If something does happen to you, the information found on your itinerary form may assist police in finding you.

Remember, victims of crimes can be missing for days before co-workers begin to worry, unless they are told when to expect you back.

SAFETY TIP #3 — KEEP A CELL PHONE IN YOUR HAND

“In Case of Emergency” (ICE), program your emergency numbers into speed dial. These numbers should include 911, emergency road service, your office, your family numbers, and anyone else who may be available to answer your call for help.

Keep your cell phone fully charged and have a battery reserve.

Carry your cell phone in your hand at all times. Your greatest source of help is your cell phone. If you keep your cell phone in a purse or briefcase, it may not be available when you need it most.

It’s a good idea to keep a cell phone charging adaptor in your car for emergency situations and to carry a fully charged portable battery charger.

Contact someone once an hour to let people know where you are. Anytime you feel uncomfortable about a client or customer, make a plan with a friend, colleague, or family member to contact you if they haven’t heard from you at the appointed time.

Create and share a distress signal with people in the office. See page 7 for more information regarding distress signals.

If you have an emergency situation and call 911, stay on the line and do not hang up, even if you can’t talk.

Rehearse in your own mind how you would react to an emergency situation such as a mugging or physical attack. Know when you will fight back, when you will run and when you will have an opportunity to call 911 for assistance.

Remember ... your phone can be your best friend in a bad situation.

SAFETY TIP #4 — CONDUCT A SAFE OPEN HOUSE

- Don’t advertise a listing as vacant
- Establish escape routes from each level of the house
- Call the office or a buddy hourly

- Keep your keys and cell phone with you
- Park where you can get out quickly
- Never conduct an open house alone, especially at a multi-level property

Arrive early and survey exits to establish escape routes from each level. Depending upon the location of the property, make sure all deadbolt locks are unlocked to facilitate a faster escape. Position your work station at the most visible point for viewing arriving guests. Double check the backyard to make sure you can get past the fence if necessary. When leaving the property, secure the house and check all windows and doors.

When prospects begin arriving at the open house, write down their car description, license number and a physical description of each person. This will assist you in remembering names as well. If possible, provide an electronic registration sheet on a tablet and transmit it each time someone registers. At a minimum, have a paper registration and a pen. Place one of your business cards, with the date and time on the back, in a kitchen cupboard.

Consider using a webcam to record prospects' images as they enter the house. (Avoid audio without talking first to an attorney about how and when audio recordings are permissible. For more information, go to <http://bulletins.ncrec.gov/the-use-of-audiovideo-equipment-during-showings/>)

Avoid attics, basements and getting trapped in small rooms. Always let prospective clients lead the way into rooms, while you stay close to the door.

Notify neighbors in advance or, if time permits, introduce yourself to the neighbors and let them know when you will be showing a house. They will be more alert to unusual sounds and you will have somewhere to run to if you need help.

Make sellers aware of the safety risks associated with open houses. Remind sellers to put valuables and prescription drugs in a safe, secure place. Do not leave your briefcase, purse or laptop, tablet or mobile device sitting on the counter.

Never conduct an open house alone, especially in a multi-level house where observing guests is even more difficult. Always enlist the help of a teammate, lender, builder, spouse, assistant, friend, etc. Thieves often work in teams. While one is keeping you occupied, the other is stealing whatever they can. In a recent case reported in *REALTOR® Magazine*, a real estate professional was holding an open house when the home was burglarized by two men. One of them distracted the agent while the other man stole jewelry and a TV, and also the open house sign-in sheet. At the time, the agent hadn't thought that the men looked suspicious.

Be aware of suspicious behavior and your surroundings.

SAFETY TIP #5 — HAVE A DISTRESS CODE

Have a prearranged distress signal:

“I’m at the Jones house at (address) and I need to reschedule the “Callahan” meeting...” [Come up with a phrase or key word to let the person answering your call know you are in distress.]

You may be in a situation where you think you might need help; you can use the phone, but the person you are with can overhear the conversation and you do not want to alert him or her. This is where a prearranged distress code can help.

For example, you are in your car with a prospective client who is beginning to make you nervous — for one reason or another, you feel uneasy about the person. You do not want to be in an empty house with him or her. Call, email, or text the office and tell someone where you are going. Give them the prearranged distress code alerting them to have someone meet you at the site so you will not be alone. You can make up your own distress code — one that would sound reasonable to a prospective client; however, it may be advisable to have a single distress code that is used by the entire office.

The distress code should be used if you are uneasy, but do not feel you are in danger. If you are in immediate danger — stop the car and leave the area, or jump out of the car at the next stop. Do not hesitate to call 911.

Authorities agree that most rapists and thieves are looking for easy targets. Be assertive and leave a dangerous situation early, but have a distress code for times you feel uneasy.

Share and practice your distress code with your office, colleagues, family and friends. This helped a Charlotte broker who made arrangements to tour homes with a buyer. On the day of his appointment, the buyer assaulted the broker at knife-point in one home, and then threatened to kill her if she didn’t take him to a second home where he assaulted her again. As she made the appointment to view the second home, the broker used a preset code word as a distress signal. The attacker was caught and charged.

SAFETY TIP #6 — DON’T MAKE PERSONAL MARKETING TOO PERSONAL

Your marketing practices can jeopardize your safety.

Giving out too much of the wrong information can make you a target. Concentrate on your professional proficiency rather than personal information in advertisements, resumes, business cards and websites.

- Your marketing materials should be polished and professional.
- Limit the amount of personal information you share.
- Use your office number and have your calls forwarded to your cell phone.
- Use your office address rather than your home address.

Be especially careful of what you post on social media websites. Remember that once you post online, that post tends to stay online. Consider with each post whether it's something you are comfortable with the world seeing for the indefinite future.

Keep your personal life and your professional life separate. Be careful how much personal information you give verbally as well. "Getting to know your client" does not need to include personal information about your children, or where or with whom you live. Be guarded with your personal information or you may put yourself and your family's safety at risk.

SAFETY TIP #7 — HAVE A BUDDY

Know in advance who you are going to call when:

- Your instincts tell you to get help
- You're just a little nervous
- You need help at an open house

Consider the following case: a female real estate agent was held at gunpoint in Florida and robbed. The agent was showing a home to a man when he pulled a handgun and tied her hands and feet with zip ties. "The moment he walked in, I knew something was wrong," the realtor told ABC Action News. The man carried a briefcase and closed a bedroom door behind him while inside the home, she said. "He put his briefcase down, grabbed the gun, points at me and says, 'Lay there, get on the floor.'" He asked for money, but the agent told him she didn't have any. "He looks to the ceiling and says, 'This is not good. This is really not good,'" she remembers him saying. What saved her? A knock at the door from another broker preparing to show the house scared off the robber. Although this agent was alone, the arrival of the second agent made all the difference.

SAFETY TIP #8 — DRESS FOR SAFETY

- Dress professionally for your market
- Don't wear expensive or excessive jewelry
- Dress for the weather
- Only carry the cash or credit cards you need
- Carry yourself with confidence
- Don't wear shoes that hamper your ability to move quickly, if necessary.

Your image is important. Appropriate attire will help promote a professional image, but clothing that is too tight or too revealing detracts from it. Think of the image you are trying to project. Is it professional? Would you buy a house from the person in the photo? Don't ask for problems by the way you dress.

Your clothing can also present a safety issue. For example, excessive heel height on shoes could hamper your ability to move quickly in an emergency as well as pose a hazard when you are in a construction site or other area requiring sure footing.

Expensive jewelry can make you a target. We recommend that you save the flashy jewelry for formal occasions. Criminals will scout real estate representatives and homes for jewelry, laptop computers, tablets, mobile devices and items that are easy to sell, so don't flash the cash or wear diamonds when you are in the office or on the road.

Dress for the weather. Your mom used to tell you this for good reason. If your car breaks down or you need to escape a dangerous situation on foot, you could find yourself exposed to harsh weather conditions for an extended period of time. In the winter, bring a coat with you and keep a blanket in the trunk of your car.

Consider your footwear and whether you can make a quick getaway. As reported in *REALTOR® Magazine*, a 29-year-old agent was reportedly attacked by two masked men in a model home. The men initially approached the female agent from behind, then sprayed her with mace, stole her jewelry, and fled. The agent ran into the neighborhood calling for help; three people called 911 for her. To help her get away, she got rid of her shoes. "She was running down the street and she had no shoes or socks on and it was cold so I knew something was up," neighbor Tevin Pitts told WLWT News 5. "Her nose was bleeding and she couldn't see and she kept asking for help."

SAFETY TIP #9 — DANGER IS NOT ALWAYS EASY TO IDENTIFY

- Gut feelings
- Hesitation
- Unexplained fear
- Apprehension

These are signals that something isn't right!

Safety experts agree that it is best to assume that your instincts are right and to take the necessary precautions. Do not be so anxious for a sale that you ignore your own intuition in the heat of the moment. Use these same instincts before you give out your phone number or address, and especially before getting in the car with a new client.

SAFETY TIP #10 — PRACTICE VEHICLE SAFETY

- Always have your keys with you
- Keep your doors locked at all times
- Park in a well-lit area
- Don't get blocked in
- Beware of dead-end streets
- Keep your vehicle in good running condition
- Consider using separate vehicles
- Be alert to your surroundings

When you are alone, the first thing you should do when you get into your vehicle is lock the doors. Be observant when approaching your vehicle, looking underneath and in the back seat before you get in.

You spend a lot of time in your vehicle. This, in itself, exposes you to a greater likelihood of running out of gas, a mechanical failure or an accident. Make sure you have a fully charged cell phone, tools, blankets, flares, first aid kit and warm clothes in the trunk.

Keep a spare key hidden somewhere on the outside of your vehicle, just in case you cannot get to your main set of keys. A strong magnet key holder works well for this.

Using a cell phone while driving can cause an accident. For driving safety, purchase a hands-free phone kit or Bluetooth device for your vehicle. And never attempt to take notes while driving — pull over and stop in a safe place first.

When working with a client or customer, take separate vehicles whenever possible. As you park your vehicle, take in your surroundings and ask yourself: In an emergency, am I going to be able to run to my vehicle and drive away? You won't be able to if you are blocked in. Park on the street whenever possible to avoid being blocked in a driveway.

If you are in an unfamiliar area, make mental notes of landmarks, points of interest and intersections. And always know the exact address of where you are going.

If you must take one vehicle, you drive!

Consider a keyless entry system and global positioning system (GPS) such as "On Star" for your next vehicle. Make sure all doors are locked when you are driving. Secure valuables out of sight.

If you periodically carry large deposits to the bank, be especially aware of any strangers lurking around the office parking lot. If you must transport cash deposits, use the buddy system or arrange for a security service or police escort.

SAFETY TIP #11 — LET THEM LEAD THE WAY

- Be aware of possible escape routes
- Leave doors open
- Be wary in attics and basements
- Walk behind your clients

In Georgia, charges were filed against a man who allegedly attacked a real estate agent while posing as a woman. The attacker called to express interest in a listed residential property. The listing broker met the attacker at the property and became suspicious. She let the man into the property but did not follow. When he came out, he attacked her. The agent was able to fight back and run toward the road, attracting the attention of passing motorists.

When you show a house by yourself, avoid entering first whenever possible. It is too easy to be cornered or trapped in a room, basement or attic. Have your client go ahead of you. You can flee more easily if you get a bad feeling about the situation.

When you show a house, be aware of possible escape routes and leave all doors open.

Also, if you are absolutely comfortable with the person to whom you are showing property but uncomfortable with the neighborhood where it is located, you may want to consider locking the door behind you to prevent someone else from entering it while you are there. Or even better have a buddy accompany you.

SAFETY TIP #12 — FIGHT OR FLIGHT?

- Yell “fire” to get attention
- Select response that fits the situation
- Run and call 911 when you can
- Take a self-defense training course
- If you strike, mean it

It’s not pleasant to think about, but even the most safety-conscious real estate professionals might find themselves in a dangerous situation. If this happens, remember that the primary goal in any incident is to escape from the danger and call for help. Try to find a discreet way of removing yourself from the situation, such as saying you need to step outside to make a phone call and then not going back inside.

If an attack does occur, trust yourself and stay as calm as possible. Think rationally and evaluate your options. There is no one right way to respond to a confrontation, because each situation is different. The response depends on the circumstances: location of the attack, your personal resources, the characteristics of the assailant and the presence of weapons. There are many strategies

that are effective, but you must rely on your own judgment to choose the best one:

POSSIBLE RESPONSES TO AN ATTACK:

Flight — Immediately try to distance yourself from the situation. This is the preferred response. Once you are safely away, you can reevaluate the situation and contact the authorities.

Passive resistance — Appear to cooperate with your attacker until such time as you can change the situation. If it is a matter of just giving up your property, do it! Your life is worth more than a possession. If the attacker has a weapon, you may need to cooperate until you can make a plan for a different response. Keep talking to the attacker, refer to yourself by name, and make it personal. It is much harder for an attacker to hurt someone they see as a real person. If the opportunity to escape arises, take it.

Verbal assertiveness — If someone is coming toward you, hold out your hands in front of you and yell, “Stop” or “Stay Back!” Several criminals interviewed said they’d leave a woman alone if she yelled or showed that she was not afraid to fight back.

Fight — Escape, if possible, should always be your first priority. However, in some situations you may need to fight your way into a position to escape. Remember that there is no such thing as a fair fight; use whatever weapon is available to you (e.g., ink pen, car keys, pepper spray, etc.). If you fight your attacker, try to hit vulnerable areas such as the eyes, nose, face, shins, feet, or groin. These areas are more likely to cause distracting pain to the attacker, which could allow you to escape.

No matter which response you choose, be decisive and act accordingly to your situation. No two situations are alike, nor should they be treated as such.

Make an effort to get an accurate description of your attacker(s). Even the smallest details may give authorities a clue to finding the suspect.

In addition to being good for your health, keeping yourself physically fit can be an effective means of facilitating escape or preventing being overpowered. Physical fitness makes you feel better about yourself, and an air of confidence can sometimes be enough to deter a would-be attacker.

Self-defense training is good for maintaining physical fitness and gives you the skills you may need to overcome a situation that goes bad quickly. In addition to the various disciplines of privately-offered self-defense training that may be available in your community, many police departments offer courses at little or no charge.

OFFICE PROCEDURES

Limit unauthorized access — Offices should consider an inexpensive door access control system that prohibits unauthorized persons from entering sales and administrative offices.

The Real Estate Safety Council recommends the use of the following forms at all real estate offices, regardless of size. The forms were developed by agents, for agents, after consulting law enforcement officials for their input. The purpose of these forms is:

- To deter assaults by positively identifying the people we are working with
- To have emergency information for everyone in the real estate office
- If a crime occurs, to know where the agent was going so the police can help
- To identify every client wanting to meet with an agent

Agent Personal Information Form — If there was an accident or an agent did not check in when they were scheduled to, you or the police would need this information quickly. We recommend placing the Agent Personal Information Forms collectively in a separate folder that anyone can access. The information should be updated at least once a year. You may want to schedule an annual review of the information during Real Estate Safety Week.

Agent Itinerary Form — This simple form helps you find an agent when there is an emergency and gives you a place to look when an agent is missing. Many agents print an additional “show list” and attach the form to it. Your front office staff will appreciate having this information if they need to contact an agent. Also, consider having a system for following up when agents don’t return or call the office in a timely manner.

TO OBTAIN FORMS

Visit the REALTOR® Safety section of www.ncrealtors.org or the Real Estate Commission’s website at www.ncrec.gov to download these forms for your own use.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information and suggestions on how to improve your safety and security as a real estate agent, you may also wish to consult the websites of the National Association of REALTORS® (www.realtor.org/safety), the North Carolina Sex Offender and Public Protection Registry (<http://sexoffender.ncsbi.gov/>) and other Internet sites under “real estate agent safety.”

NOTES AND COMMENTS

AGENT PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM

Name: _____ Updated: _____

Home Address: _____

CONTACT NUMBERS: (Include area codes)

Cell: _____

Home: _____

Pager: _____

Home Office: _____

Other: _____

EMERGENCY CONTACTS: (Provide at least one)

Name: _____

Relationship: _____

Phone(s): _____

AUTO: (List your most frequently used auto first.)

Make & Model: _____

Color: _____

Owner: _____

License #: _____ State: _____

2ND AUTO:

Make & Model: _____

Color: _____

Owner: _____

MEDICAL INFORMATION:

Primary Physician: _____

Phone #: _____

Special medical conditions/medication: _____

Note: Keep a record of your major credit card information in a safe, accessible place in case of an emergency, loss or theft of cards.

AGENT ITINERARY FORM

This form is designed for your safety and security. Please leave the completed form with the receptionist, along with your showing itinerary information.

Agent: _____

Date: _____

Customer/Client Name(s): _____

Client/Customer/Contact Information: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

Cell Phone: _____

Business Phone: _____

Email: _____

Drivers License No.: _____

State of Insurance: _____

Anticipated time of return to office: _____

AM PM

Will call office by: _____

AM PM

My contact number while showing property: _____

Comments: _____

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