

Violence at Work – How to Keep Your Employees Safe

Recent events in the world have many employers thinking about gun violence and what appropriate measures to take to ensure their workplace is a safe place for employees, clients, vendors and all others who enter. While protecting against gun violence at work is a serious, important, and timely topic, violence at work in general is equally important and worthy of discussion.

Workplace violence is defined by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration ([OSHA](#)) as any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs on the work site. The general types of violence experienced at work include random criminal acts, violence by a co-worker, customer, or client, or violence resulting from a personal situation (i.e., domestic violence or stalking). Violence can involve employees, supervisors, customers, contractors, vendors, visitors, or strangers.

According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), in 2016 there were 792 incidents of intentional injury, 500 resulting in homicide; this represents an increase of 23% and 20% respectively over the prior year. Other incidents of workplace violence not typically reported or included in the statistics above include fighting, confrontation, berating, arguing, and sexual assault. The impact on employees can include physical or psychological harm, absences, medical costs, and long-term stress or anxiety. But, even though an estimated 2 million American workers are impacted by workplace violence each year, only 25% of companies spend time and resources to make a plan and take preventative action.

While workplace violence can occur at any company in any industry or location, jobs that involve exchanging money in public, serving alcohol, working with volatile or unstable people, working alone or in isolated areas, working late at night, or working in a high-crime area carry more risk. Healthcare professionals, public service workers, customer service employees, teachers, janitorial staff, and law enforcement officers have the highest risk due to a combination of factors.

Companies can feel impacts including property damage, loss of inventory, reduction in staff, increased security and insurance costs, legal exposure and costs, damage to a company's reputation, or an inability to operate business for some time. Companies should take measures to protect employees and help prevent or reduce the chance of incident, escalation, and harm. The following measures can help:

1. **Company Policies:** Strong, well-worded policies can send a powerful message to employees and give you a formidable basis to prevent workplace violence or to be able to stop it before it escalates. You should be sure your handbook has essential policies including Workplace Safety, Weapons, Searches, Harassment/Sexual Harassment, Visitors, Code of Conduct, and Disciplinary Action. Ensure every employee receives a handbook and signs an acknowledgement of receipt of the handbook stating they will comply with all the policies. And if you are missing any of these policies, now is the time to put them in place and, again, have employees acknowledge the new policy once it is implemented.
2. **Hiring Practices:** Knowing who you are hiring allows you get an understanding of who will be working with you before they enter your workplace. Incorporating comprehensive criminal background checks and conducting professional and personal reference checks will allow you to gather information about a potential employee's past and disposition. While you may not find out everything, it is an important step to minimize your exposure to a claim of negligent hire.

3. **Disciplinary Action:** Take a zero-tolerance stance on violence, threats, harassment, or intimidation. Do not allow a situation to escalate or be repeated by stepping in as soon as it is known. If the situation involves two employees, separate, investigate, and take decisive disciplinary action. If a non-employee is involved, have the individual removed and prevent the individual from coming back. If a vendor, contractor, or client is involved, review the business relationship. Companies can have legal exposure to negligent retention claims if employees or business relationships are maintained after knowledge of violent or threatening behavior.
4. **Security Measures:** Implement practices to help keep your work site and employees safe. Install security cameras and a security system with keys or access badges. Make sure no one works alone if possible. Hire security guards. Assess the location before committing to a work space. Keep minimal money on hand. Post signs stating measures taken to deter offenders.
5. **Prohibit Weapons:** Create and enforce a zero-tolerance no-weapons policy as strict as possible to cover all weapons including firearms, knives, and explosives. In most states you can restrict weapons completely from company property and company vehicles. However, some states require permitted gun owners to be allowed to leave their firearms locked and out of sight in their personal vehicle in the parking lot.
6. **Safety Program:** Create a thorough safety program covering any situation. Include procedures, contacts, phone numbers, forms, etc. Outline the expectations, roles, and responsibilities of employees and managers. Make sure employees know they can call 9-1-1 whenever they feel the need. Communicate this plan to everyone and make sure they know where to find the information if needed. The [Department of Labor](#) and [Department of Homeland Security](#) have comprehensive programs online that you can pull information from to develop yours.
7. **Conduct Training:** Train employees what to do if faced with different situations so they do not need to make uneducated decisions in the moment. Consider bringing in experts to provide active shooter situation training such as the [“Run. Hide. Fight”](#) concept promoted by the Department of Homeland Security.
8. **Benefit Programs:** Assess your benefit offerings to include programs that employees would need if faced with workplace violence. Along with Workers’ Comp, health and disability insurance, consider offering an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or legal insurance.

During these difficult times, proactive planning, policies, action, and training are not only good business sense to minimize exposure but are vital to keeping your employees and workplace safe.

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