

Acts of Workplace Violence

Media coverage of workplace violence tends to misrepresent the scale and nature of the problem. While the dramatic, isolated incidents often publicized are shocking, most workplace violence consists in less newsworthy – but equally worrisome – activity, including threats of physical violence, harassment, intimidation or other threatening behavior. And while failing to adequately prevent and cope with violent incidents in the workplace can lead to increased workers' compensation costs, absenteeism, property damage and negative publicity, over 70 percent of U.S. workplaces do not have a formal policy or program addressing workplace violence, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Recognizing the risk or workplace violence and taking action is essential. The creation of a sound prevention plan is the most important and ultimately least costly portion of any group's workplace violence program.

Types of Workplace Violence

- Criminal – the perpetrator has no legitimate relationship to the business or its employees and generally commits a crime in conjunction with the violence (shoplifting, robbery, trespassing).
- Customer or Client – the perpetrator has a legitimate relationship with the business and becomes violent while being served by the business (clients, customers, students, patrons).
- Co-worker – the perpetrator is a current or past employee, or is a contractor who works as a temporary employee of the business.
- Domestic Violence – the perpetrator has no legitimate relationship with the business but has a personal relationship with a victim, and threatens or assaults him or her at the workplace (family member, boyfriend or girlfriend).

Risk Factors

There are several activities that might increase a worker's risk for workplace assault, including the following:

- Contact with the public
- Exchange of money
- Delivery of passengers, goods or services
- Mobile workplaces
- Working with unstable or volatile clients or patients
- Working alone or in small numbers
- Working late at night or during early morning hours
- Working in high-crime areas
- Guarding valuable property or possessions
- Working in community-based settings

Prevention Strategies

There are actions that you can take to protect your employees and mitigate the risk of workplace violence. Evaluate the workplace and identify both physical and administrative adjustments that you can make to lessen your risk of a violent incident.

Environmental Design

- Protect your employees using cash-handling policies such as locked drop safes, small amounts of cash to carry, and notices to visitors or clients that limited cash is available.

- Explore the use of cashless transactions.
- Install bullet-resistant barriers or enclosures with appropriately high and deep counters where interaction with the public is necessary.
- Ensure good lighting, both internally and externally.
- Limit the number of unlocked entrances and hiding places for workers.
- Design buildings and parking areas so that they do not have hiding places.
- Place garbage areas, outdoor refrigeration areas and other storage facilities in a way that does not unnecessarily expose employees by forcing them to walk distances alone or in poorly lit areas.
- Make use of security devices such as closed-circuit cameras, alarms, card-key access systems, panic-bar doors locked from the outside and geographic locating devices in mobile workplaces.

Administrative Controls

- When possible, increase the number of staff on duty at opening and closing hours
- Review work practices and staffing during money drops and pickups.
- Consider the risk of assault when directing workers to take out garbage, dispose of grease, store items in external areas and transport money.
- Institute policies and procedures that indicate a zero tolerance of workplace violence and provide direction for reporting and handling incidents.
- Provide training in defusing or de-escalating potentially violent situations, and inform employees of the risks of workplace violence.
- Establish procedures for obtaining medical care and psychological support after a violent incident.
- Establish a crisis response plan that describes procedures to follow in the event of an emergency.
- Establish an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) with trained counselors who are able to address workplace stress and violence issues. As a confidential service to employees, the EAP provider will assess whether a situation needs to be brought to management and can intervene in employee conflicts.

Identifying Potentially Violent Situations

There are often several red flags that can be detected before an employee commits an act of violence. Be alert and train employees to be alert for these indicators of potential workplace violence, stressing the importance of reporting any suspicious behavior:

- Intimidating, harassing, bullying, belligerent or other inappropriate and aggressive behavior
- Conflicts with customers, co-workers or supervisors
- Making references to weapons or idle threats
- Statements indicating approval of violence or identification with perpetrators of workplace homicides
- Desperate or suicidal statements
- Substance abuse
- Extreme change in normal behavior

Train those in supervisory roles not to overreact but not to ignore a situation. Discussing the situation with experts on staff or in human resources can help determine how best to handle the situation.

Responding to Violence

No amount of preventive action can guarantee there will never be an incident of violence at your workplace. It is essential that when a violent incident does occur, the response be timely and appropriate. After the incident, recognize that employees could be traumatized and provide appropriate counseling.

Beyond Training

Employee training on ways to respond to and report incidents of workplace violence is a necessary, but not sufficient condition in prevention of workplace violence. Training should increase awareness of workplace violence risks, emphasize the importance of adhering to protective administrative controls and encourage employees to immediately report any suspicious or

threatening behavior. While training is only one component of a successful comprehensive workplace violence prevention program, preventive adjustments by management are equally important.

Provided by McGriff
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