

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

OBJECTIVES

- Staff will learn risk factors associated with workplace violence
- Staff will learn current practices to avoid workplace violence
- Staff will understand the organization's workplace violence policy

A recently terminated employee returns to your office and makes threatening remarks to a current employee. Would you know how to handle the situation? Are you trained in how to respond to these types of incidents? These are just some of the issues presented by the growing problem of workplace violence.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) estimates that over one million people in the US are victims of violent crime in the workplace each year. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has officially declared workplace homicide to be an epidemic. Workplace homicides continue to be a major cause of occupational fatalities in the US. Robbery was the leading motive, followed by violence by co-workers and customers or clients. In a recent one-year period, two million people were attacked, six million threatened, and 16 million harassed.

All employers need to be aware that there are no safe havens from workplace violence. Employers need to do whatever they can to protect their workforce because workplace violence can happen anywhere.

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

NIOSH defines workplace violence as any physical assault, threatening behavior, or verbal abuse in the workplace.

Workplace violence generally results from:

- Domestic violence
- Disgruntled customers/clients
- Co-workers
- Criminal acts

The three common motives for these types of violence are:

- Jealousy
- Revenge

- Financial gain

Workplace violence can be divided into several categories, depending on the relationship between the assailant and worker or workplace. The categories include:

- Violence by strangers- The person causing the violence has no legitimate relationship to the workplace. The person enters the workplace to commit a crime, usually on the pretense of being a customer or client.
- Violence by customer or client- The violence is committed by someone who receives service by the organization. The person may be a current or former irate customer or client.
- Violence by co-worker- The assailant is a current or former employee who is angry about a situation.
- Violence by personal relations- The assailant has a relationship with a current or former employee, e.g., romantic obsession, boy/girl friend, etc.

RISK FACTORS

Factors that put workers at risk for workplace violence include employees that:

- Interact with the public
- Exchange or possess money
- Deliver goods or services
- Work late at night or during early morning hours
- Work alone or in small numbers
- Guard valuables or property
- Deal with violent people or volatile situations in health care, social service, or criminal justice settings

Violent acts committed by current or former employees usually don't come out of the blue. In most of these cases, the assailant offered warning signs. Employers should look for the following signals:

- Veiled and conditional threats
- Employees talking about "getting even" with co-workers or employer
- Fascination with other violent acts
- Fascination with weapons
- Tendencies to blame others for problems
- Loner personalities
- Bully personalities
- Depressive and suicidal tendencies
- Alcohol or substance abusers
- Self mutilation
- Past history of violence
- Incidents in which the individual describes a specific violent act or fantasy

AVOIDANCE PRACTICES

The four most important steps employees can take to protect themselves from violence are:

1. OBSERVE- Notice changes in behavior or suspicious situations.
2. REPORT- Anything unusual or suspicious; treat every threat as though it is real
3. DE-ESCALATE- Tense situations
4. RETREAT- If de-escalation doesn't work, try to retreat to safety.

Exterior Threats: Violence by strangers is perpetrated by individuals with no connection to organization business and generally wants to commit a criminal act.

- Employees should be observant and follow good security procedures to prevent criminal acts
 - Be particularly observant for strangers acting nervous, threatening or unusually dressed and for strangers that are loitering in areas they don't belong
- Remove or secure valuables from plain sight
- Evaluate remote worksites, e.g., security plans, lighting, pedestrian traffic, location, availability of law enforcement, etc.
 - Adopt buddy system when working at remote sites or before or after hours

Interior Threats: Violence by perpetrators with a connection to the organization or its employee.

- Report customers/clients using abusive language on the telephone or demonstrating extreme rage because of perceived slow service, poor quality, or lack of information or responsiveness
- Report threats of any kind directed at an employee, supervisor, manager, or the organization.
- Report any problems that you or a co-worker may be having outside the workplace that could affect the work environment, e.g., domestic violence, divorce, break up, restraining order, romantic obsessions, gang connections, etc.
- Report co-worker behavioral changes that include, verbal threats of any kind, talk about "getting even", frequent anger or defensiveness about work actions, obsession with weapons, substance abuse, increase in irritability and impatience, blaming others for lack of success, acute depression, adversarial relationships at work, changes in personal hygiene, negative changes in behavior, etc.
- Take security measures when handling employee demotions, poor performance reviews, disciplinary actions, grievance hearings, terminations, etc.
- Adopt buddy system when working at remote sites or before or after hours

DE-ESCALATE TENSE SITUATIONS

If you encounter extreme anger or rage:

- Remain calm and notice if they have an object or weapon
- Maintain direct eye contact and speak clearly
- Try to maneuver so that there is a barrier between you and the individual
- Don't argue or raise your voice
- Give them any valuables they request
- Use a pre-arranged code word to warn others of impending danger
- Get assistance, if there is time
- Withdraw, if possible
- If attacked, make as much noise as possible

POLICY

Review all policies and procedures related to workplace violence and security procedures.

CLOSING

- *Encourage discussion about the presentation and workplace violence. Discuss examples of workplace violence and preventative steps employees and/or the organization could have taken in these examples.*