

Protecting Against Workplace Violence

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Each day, public employees face the growing threat of workplace violence. While bombings such as the one at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City remain the extreme and statistically rare form of workplace violence, other forms have become alarmingly common.

Federal, state, and local governments are struggling to protect their employees' safety, and it's no easy task. Government leaders face many challenges from a wide range of potential violence, but there are a number of things that can be done to provide protection in the workplace.

A Growing Threat

To put the problem in perspective, it's important to understand the magnitude of the threat that violence presents to American workers:

- Homicide now is the number one cause of death for women workers in the United States and the number three cause for all U.S. workers.
- Workplace homicide is the fastest growing homicide.

**TEASING
VERBAL
ABUSE
THREATS
VANDALISM
GRABBING
STALKING**

There are more than 2 million workplace assaults in the United States each year. In addition, there are 16 million workers who are harassed and 6 million who are threatened.

- The rate at which supervisors are murdered at work has doubled since 1985.
- The U.S. Department of Justice found that one out of every six crimes occurs at the workplace.

As shocking as these statistics are, they probably underestimate the problem. A study by J. R. Lion, W. Snyder, and G. L. Merrill estimated that for every five workplace violence incidents that occur, only one is reported.

Government employees appear to be at even greater risk than private sector employees. In 1994, the Bureau of Justice reported that while government employees made up only 18 percent of the workforce from 1987 to 1992, 30 percent of workplace violence victims were federal, state, or local government employees. Further, with the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, federal employees' statistical risk of dying on the job as a result of workplace violence increased.

All employers have an ethical and legal duty to provide employees a safe, healthy work environment. The statistics clearly show that workplace violence now is a major cause of workplace injury and death. It's a foreseeable threat to worker safety, thus employers have a duty to take all reasonable precautions to prevent it.

Acknowledging this threat, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued guidelines clarifying an employer's obligation to provide a workplace free of known safety hazards, including violence. OSHA requires all employers to assess the risk posed by all threats to employee safety and to take reasonable steps to minimize such threats. Employers who fail to protect employees from known hazards, including violence, are liable for citations and fines that can reach \$70,000.

The Perpetrators

One way to understand the phenomena of workplace violence is to explore its many manifestations. Here are OSHA's categories for workplace violence:

- Type I: The perpetrator has no legitimate relationship to the workplace and usually enters it to commit a robbery or other criminal act.
- Type II: The perpetrator is the recipient of services, e.g. a current or former client, patient, passenger, criminal suspect, or prisoner.
- Type III: The perpetrator has an employment-related involvement with the workplace. Usually this involves a current or former employee, supervisor or manager; a current or former spouse or lover of an employee; or a relative or friend of a current or former employee.

One of the most serious threats posed by perpetrators with no legitimate relationship to the workplace (Type I) comes from people who hold strong antigovernment beliefs. Local governments should realize that the anger and resentment these individuals hold toward the federal government easily generalizes to state, county, or city entities. While many individuals focus their rhetoric on federal actions like Ruby Ridge and Waco, they can view local officials with the same suspicion, resentment, and distrust.

Government employees also face threats in serving their clients, the public (Type II). They must serve all segments of the population, including people who are mentally ill, have convictions for violent crimes, or are under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Further, they must enforce laws, rules, and policies that are unpopular.

Based on statistical evidence, OSHA has expressed specific concern for the safety of the following types of service providers:

- Medical care providers in acute care hospitals, long-term care facilities,

outpatient clinics, and home health agencies.

- Mental health and psychiatric care providers in inpatient facilities, outpatient clinics, and home health agencies.
- Alcohol and drug treatment providers.
- Law enforcement personnel.
- Social welfare service providers in unemployment offices, welfare eligibility offices, homeless shelters, probation offices, and child welfare agencies.
- Teaching, administrative, and support staff in schools where students have a history of violent behavior.
- Other types of service providers, including justice system personnel, customer service representatives, and delivery personnel.

It's surprising that the greatest threat of violence to employees comes not from the public but from coworkers and relatives (Type III). When discussing workplace violence, it's common for the most extreme form, homicide, to get all the attention. Workplace violence, however, takes many forms and usually is not lethal.

In fact, it's the less dramatic, non-lethal, forms of violence that constitute the greatest statistical threat to workers (see "Nonlethal Threats," page X). Elizabeth Q. Bulatao and Gary R. VandenBos reported that in 1992 only one out of every 650 workplace violence acts involved homicide. While the cost of a workplace homicide incident can easily run into the millions of dollars, the sheer number of nonlethal workplace violence cases make them collectively more expensive.

Losses to the Organization

The psychological trauma of even a simple assault on an employee can be devastating. Nonlethal, employee-on-employee violence inflicts insidious damage that can threaten the health of the entire organization. It results in such adverse

consequences as reduced productivity and morale; it increases costs for legal services and security; and it increases insurance costs for workers' compensation, medical and general liability. It also can result in losses from employee theft, vandalism, and sabotage.

Moreover, this type of violence can create a working environment that is so toxic that virtually no work gets done. Employees spend their time thinking and talking about the hostility around them; planning how to protect themselves or retaliate against those who have harmed them; or working on their resumes.

Incidents of workplace violence aren't only personal tragedies, they expose the agency to an array of costs and liabilities. The National Safe Workplace Institute estimated that workplace violence cost U.S. employers \$4.2 billion in 1992. Attacks by employees expose employers to civil suits from victims for such claims as negligent hiring, negligent supervision, and negligent retention. Additionally, such incidents can be a public relations nightmare, eroding public respect and confidence and wreaking havoc if the agency attempts to raise money through new taxes, fees, or bonds.

Planning a Solution

Fortunately, there's plenty managers can do to prevent workplace violence. Here are steps that will help reduce the likelihood of violence:

Step 1. Get the commitment of upper-level management, including elected officials, managers, division heads, and department heads to provide a safe and nonviolent workplace. Employees need to know from the top down that the policy is here to stay and will be aggressively enforced. Without such support, employees often slip back into detrimental behavior patterns.

Developing a planning committee is a good way to start the process. It's essential to involve key managers and administrators. It's important to involve workplace violence prevention experts,

Nonlethal Threats

Most incidents of workplace violence are not lethal, yet have devastating physical and emotional consequences for vulnerable victims. Such incidents incur huge costs for employers. Examples of nonlethal, employee-on-employee violence include:

- Teasing and practical jokes that cause anger or humiliation.
- Intimidation, bullying.
- Angry outbursts.
- Verbal abuse, name calling, biting sarcasm, or obscene language.
- Threats (verbal, written, or gesticulated).
- Harassment (general and sexual).
- Theft, vandalism, and sabotage.
- Throwing or breaking objects.
- Hitting, pushing, poking, slapping, grabbing, and other forms of physical battery.
- Romantic obsessions and stalking.
- Sexual assault and rape.

whether they be employees or outside consultants. Also include representatives from the departments of risk management, legal services, human resources, and public safety, as well as from employee assistance programs and unions. As employees develop and implement the prevention program, they become knowledgeable about workplace violence. Consequently, they often become members of a crisis team developed to deal with specific incidents.

Step 2. Assess current workplace violence risk. Start with a detailed analysis of each workplace violence incident for the past few years; focus on determining causes, precipitating events, and incident patterns.

Many data reflect workplace violence. Review past injury and workers' compensation data, medical insurance costs or

claims to uncover locations, job classifications, or work groups that have above average use. This data may reveal unhealthy, overly stressful or hostile work environments. Review employee turnover statistics and exit interview data to ascertain why employees are leaving. Review civil suits filed against the agency. Consider employee surveys, employee interviews, and site inspections. Create a detailed, specific risk analysis by department, work location, and job classification.

Also inspect physical work sites. Worksite security needs depend on many factors, including the community environment, crime rates, the nature of services provided, the population served, the value of assets, and employee and public access. Consider the following when conducting a worksite inspection:

- Security for employees who handle money and valuables and for those who work at night, in early morning, alone, or in high crime areas.
- Access by the public, employees, and former employees.
- Security equipment, including signage, lighting, locks, video cameras, metal detectors, emergency telephone and communication systems, safe rooms, and alarms.

Step 3. The planning committee should develop a written workplace violence prevention policy. Some of the factors to consider are:

- Consistency with, and impact on, organizational culture.
- Ability to ensure the safety of every employee.
- Legal and regulatory sufficiency, so the plan meets federal, state, county, and city laws and regulations.
- Cost.
- Enforceability without violation of law, personal rights, or union contract and without creating unacceptable civil liability exposure.

Use particular care to develop a policy that can and will be enforced. An un-