

Preventing Workplace Violence: Everybody's Responsibility

Violence has emerged as a top safety and health issue in today's workplaces. Fortunately for most, workplace violence is only something that happens on the six o'clock news to *someone else*. However, the reality is that it can, and does, happen within any type of business or organization. Consequently, workplace violence is everybody's problem. More importantly, *violence prevention is everybody's responsibility*.

Violence impacts organizations in many ways. The tragedy of fatally or seriously injured employees is obvious. Workplace homicide is the second leading cause of fatal occupational injury in the United States.

Less obvious is the psychological damage an organization sustains from the consequences of violence or even *threats* of violence. Morale, productivity, absenteeism, loyalty and the overall quality of work life can be negatively impacted by aggression in the workplace. Fear, anxiety and insecurity can paralyze work groups impacted by violence or threats of violence.

Red flags in the workplace

Violence is sometimes committed in the workplace by fellow employees. Employees at all levels in organizations need to be able to recognize and report danger signals, which may precede incidents of violence at work. Predicting human behavior is an inexact science, but mental health and other threat management professionals suggest that a "red flag" should be raised when an individual exhibits some or all of the following:

- menacing/intimidating gestures or physical actions
- verbal or physical threats of harm to another individual or to property
- suspicious or paranoid behavior (for example, feels others are out to "get" him)
- erratic/unpredictable behavior with emotional instability/mood swings
- signs of drug/alcohol abuse (for example, smell of alcohol on breath)
- signs of severe stress or depression (for example, crying spells, disorganized thinking)
- significant changes in appearance, behavior and/or social interactions
- bizarre or obsessive thoughts (for example, romantic obsessions)
- preoccupation with weapons and/or incidents of violence

Employees are not expected to predict or assume there is a high risk for violence based upon any one of the preceding factors. However, if an employee is aware of a co-worker who is exhibiting any of these "at risk" signals, he should discuss his observations and concerns with his supervisor. It is then management's responsibility to make further observations and involve local law enforcement and the appropriate company representatives, such as security, human resources, legal and/or the employee assistance program, if further evaluation or action is indicated.

Employee responsibilities

It is also every employee's responsibility to:

- Maintain professional conduct in the workplace and abide by company policies and standards of conduct.
- Discourage unwelcome remarks and behaviors.
- Take all threats seriously, including "jokes."
- Report unwanted or unwelcome contact, advances or threats immediately to one's supervisor or another management representative.

Violence by strangers

Strangers sometimes commit workplace violence, such as customers or the general public. Certain occupations and occupational settings increase one's risk for becoming a victim of a violent crime at work. Retail sales workers, taxi drivers and law enforcement and security personnel experience the highest rate of workplace violence. Other risk factors that increase the chance of victimization at work include: working alone, working late-night or early-morning hours and working in high-crime urban areas.

Be safe

Being responsible and prepared for your own personal safety is key to the prevention of workplace violence. For your own protection:

- **Remain calm.** Avoid arguing with irate or aggressive individuals.
- **Call for help.** Know your work site's emergency procedures and phone numbers.
- **Be visible.** Avoid little-used or unlit areas.
- **Be alert.** Look around for unusual behavior, look under and in your car before getting in, and don't get into an elevator with a suspicious-looking person.
- **Team up.** Ask a co-worker or security guard to escort you to your car.
- **Be proactive.** Report all suspicious activities/persons immediately.

Workplace violence prevention is everybody's business. Do not walk away from ways in which you can make a positive difference for yourself and others.

By Karen S. Dickason, LCSW, CEAP
© 2003-2008 Achieve Solutions

Call or visit Achieve Solutions today.
www.achievesolutions.net/wayne
(800) 852-0357