Workplace Violence: Preventing Attacks from Known Assailants
Goal
Prevent violence in the workplace.

Objective
Help employers develop an effective workplace violence prevention plan.

Background
Workplace violence – also called occupational violence – describes several broad categories of incidents. This publication focuses on violent acts by those with a past or current relationship with the organization or one of its employees.

Media coverage of workplace shootings has raised public awareness of workplace violence. Other types of violence, however, such as physical assault, harassment, and verbal abuse, are more common.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports thousands of incidents in U.S. workplaces each year in which one person intentionally injured another. Among job-related homicides, most are intentional shootings. Homicide is the second-leading cause of death of women in the workplace, and the most frequent type of assailant is a domestic partner.

Prevention Strategies
The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)'s General Duty Clause, Section 5(a)(1), requires that employers provide a place of employment free from recognized hazards, including workplace violence, that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious harm. Federal law also bans employers from retaliating against employees because the employee has filed a complaint or otherwise exercised any rights provided to employee. Visit whistleblowers.gov for more information.

Employer Analysis of Risk
OSHA recommends that employers establish a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence that covers employees, patients, clients, contractors, and others who have contact with company personnel. Employers should look at whether physical violence, tolerance of bullying, intimidation, threats, harassment, emotional abuse, anger, frustration, inconsistent discipline, erratic enforcement of company policies, or poor communication are creating anxiety or distrust in their workplaces.

Problem situations can involve particular employees or the workplace as a whole. When the problem behavior comes from an employee or someone close to an employee, employers can further assess the risk of violence at their workplaces – and have a better chance of preventing it – when an observable warning sign reaches the employer.

No single behavior necessarily suggests that someone will become violent, but certain behaviors taken together could point to potential violence. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) identifies risk factors associated with potential violence among current employees, including:

- taking weapons to work, or recently acquiring them;
- preoccupation with violence or recently publicized violent events;
- substance abuse at work;
- extreme disorganization;
- an expressed grudge about a real or imagined grievance; and
- homicidal or suicidal threats.

Threat Assessment

Threats are expressions of an intention to harm and can be specific or vague, and verbal or nonverbal. Even though most threats don't lead to violence, employers must respond to all threats because they erode workplace safety. Employers should find out the nature and context of the threat or threatening behavior; the intended target; and the threatener's apparent motivation, ability to act on the threat, past behavior, and personal, work, and military background. Employers should also carefully screen and test all new employees for history of drug abuse, past workplace conflicts, and violent crime convictions.

Employers should have a psychologist or psychiatrist conduct the assessment or get outside help from law enforcement, mental health and social service agencies, or other professionals if needed. The employer's workplace violence prevention program should identify the personnel responsible for handling all reports of threats that frighten any employee.

Signs of Victimization

Employers might hesitate to get involved with an employee's personal relationships because they don't want to invade the employee's privacy, but domestic violence and stalking can become a safety and productivity problem for everyone if an abuser or stalker strikes or threatens to strike at the employee's workplace.
The FBI lists behaviors that employers can watch for that might suggest an employee is being victimized, including:

- poor work performance;
- frequent or unplanned use of leave time;
- signs of physical injury;
- use of makeup or clothing to cover up injuries;
- emotional episodes or discomfort communicating with others; and
- disruptive visits from a current or former intimate partner.

**Workplace Violence Prevention Program**

Taking into consideration this range of behaviors and associated risks, employers should design a workplace violence prevention program based on their findings. A well-designed workplace violence prevention program lowers the number of violent incidents within an organization and creates a more supportive work environment while boosting productivity.

The written policy that goes with your workplace violence prevention program may stand alone or be incorporated into the program, employee handbook, or procedure manual. Employers should review their program regularly and revise it as needed based on personnel changes, workplace conditions, and current events. An effective workplace violence prevention program should include the following elements.

**Management Training**

- Factors that can lead to workplace negativity, stress, or difficult behavior that employers can correct include understaffing leading to overwork; frustrations about unclear job responsibilities; poor management, such as over-monitoring, correcting, or reprimanding employees in front of others; and improper handling of a job termination or other disciplinary action. Other factors include operational changes, lack of promotion opportunities, and financial concerns.
- Teamwork and a pleasant working atmosphere help reduce job stress. Managers can help create a more supportive environment by encouraging respect among employees and between employees and managers. To help maintain good working relationships, provide managers and supervisors regular training in:
  - team building;
  - communicating;
  - resolving conflicts;
  - reducing stress;
  - recognizing signs of depression, domestic violence, and drug or alcohol abuse;
  - responding quickly to threatening or violent behavior;
  - taking personal protection measures; and
  - following good hiring and firing practices.

**Security**

Employers should physically secure their workplaces to give employees an environment where they can produce their best work without anxiety. Well-lit, uncluttered premises, both inside and out, discourage criminal activity.

Other physical security measures include:

- posting information and restrictions;
- employing security guards;
- maintaining a strict visitor sign-in policy;
- requiring that employees wear identification badges;
- using door controls;
- using an alarm system; and
- using limited-access key cards and code locks.

**Employee Training**

Provide employees regular workplace and personal safety awareness training so they can learn to recognize, avoid, and ease possibly violent situations. Encourage employees to tell supervisors about any safety or security concerns. Train employees to react calmly and willingly to improve their chances of surviving a threatening situation.

**Employee Resources**

- Establish procedures for dealing fairly and quickly with complaints, and share the steps with employees. Employees who feel they work in a caring environment where they are treated fairly are less prone to outbursts. Tools include:
  - a 24-hour hotline or dedicated email address that employees may contact, anonymously if desired, to report threats of violence, unusual behavior, depression, alcohol or drug abuse, or other issues; and
  - a physical or virtual suggestion box.
- Provide employees a list of counseling services they can use during times of emotional, financial, or job-related stress. An example is an employee assistance program (EAP). EAPs are voluntary, work-based programs that offer employees who are going through personal or work-related problems free, confidential assessments; short-term counseling; referrals; and follow-up services. EAP counselors consult managers or supervisors to address employee and organizational needs.
- Refer employees affected by domestic violence to your EAP or to the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE).
Crisis-Management Plan

Develop a crisis-management plan by forming a team of security, human resources, medical, legal, line management, and other types of experts who can work together to determine: how to report violent incidents, authorities that must be alerted, security precautions that must be taken, and how to maintain safety for workers not in the immediate area. Plan to bring in a debriefing team following a traumatic incident. Early trauma counseling for employees exposed to workplace violence can help in the recovery process.

Review Questions

1. What are several behaviors that indicate a potential for violence in the workplace?
2. What are three things employers should find out in conducting a threat assessment?
3. What are five effective security measures an employer can use?
4. What are six kinds of training that can help reduce workplace violence?
5. What are some factors that contribute to job stress?
6. How can a crisis management team be effective?
7. Why is a good working relationship between employer and employee important?
8. How does customer service help prevent violence in the workplace?

Answers

1. A preoccupation with violence; an expressed grudge about a real or imagined grievance; homicidal or suicidal threats.
2. The nature and context of the threat; the intended target; the threatener’s apparent motivation.
3. Monitoring devices; ID badges; sign-in procedures; security guards; well-lit premises.
4. Training in stress reduction, communication skills, recognition and response to violent situations, personal protection, hiring and firing strategies.
5. Personal or relationship problems, layoffs, financial troubles.
6. By providing a swift response to incidents.
7. Violence is less likely when employees feel they are heard and treated fairly.
8. Customers who feel they have received good service are less likely to retaliate.