

American Heritage Protective Services

“The Workplace and Violence”

Workplace violence has become a serious health and safety issue that can take on many forms. The most serious type of workplace violence is murder, currently the third leading cause of fatal injury in the work environment and the leading cause of death for females. Nearly 9,000 fatal injuries occur in the workplace annually, and of these deaths, more than 1,200 can be attributed to violence. Although homicide is the most extreme form of violent behavior in a work setting, many other varieties occur regularly. If not addressed and monitored, these can lead to escalated and increasingly severe actions.

By definition, workplace violence includes *any physical assault or threat of assault* that occurs in the work environment, or as a result of carrying out work related duties. The broad term harassment, or any behavior that literally or figuratively creates a hostile, offensive or intimidating work environment is generally also considered a form of workplace violence. Harassment can take on several forms, such as physical or verbal abuse, derogatory jokes or insults, (any type) of unwelcome physical contact, the display or circulation of derogatory material, unwanted sexual advances, or charges and complaints against another employee which are

unfounded or unwarranted. Some less blatant conduct, including rudeness or the disregard for others, is also believed to attribute to violence in the workplace. These behaviors typically flow in a “top down” configuration and can initially lead to increases in employee absenteeism, decreased work efforts, employee theft, and employee turnover. If permitted to continue, they can serve as a potential starting point for more overt acts of aggression.

When considering the causes or prevalence of workplace violence, employers and managers typically ask four key questions:

I. Can work-related factors increase the risk of violence?

Definitely. Factors, processes and interactions that can place a workforce at increased risk of workplace violence include:

- *Working with the general public*
- *Handling money*
- *Providing service, care or education (e.g. health care workers, teachers)*
- *Working alone, in small numbers or in isolated areas*
- *Working on premises where alcohol is served (e.g. food and beverage workers)*
- *Working during periods of organizational change*

Incidents of workplace violence tend to increase during the late hours of the night or the early hours of the morning. Events such as impending employee performance appraisals, income tax return season, or the days or weeks surrounding holidays increase the likelihood of workplace violence. Enterprises located in high crime areas or those in areas isolated from other buildings or businesses also tend to experience more workplace violence incidents.

Other factors that contribute to workplace violence are the actual or perceived inconsistent treatment of employees, employee mental health problems, job stress, substance abuse, and external employee conflicts related to their personal lives.

II. Are specific occupational groups at more risk for workplace violence?

Studies have shown that certain groups, including health care workers, utility company employees, retail workers and teachers, experience a higher rate of occupational violence. Whether or not your employees fall into any of these categories, an assessment of your workplace should be conducted to determine the extent of your potential risk. In assessing the potential for risk, the history of any violent incidents in your workplace should be reviewed by:



- Analyzing the reports related to any previous incidents.
- Asking employees about their experiences and if they are concerned for their personal safety or the safety of their co-workers.
- Determining whether your workplace has any of the risk factors associated with workplace violence.
- Conducting a visual examination of your workplace, focusing on facility design/layout as well as work/administrative policies.

III. Does the potential for workplace violence really affect the company?

Specific violent incidents or the threat of potential violence has a harmful affect on the most valuable component of a business - the employees. It creates a climate of anxiety in employees, which can ultimately lead to depression, physical illness, poor work performance, increased or excessive absenteeism and/or resignations.

Businesses experience the affect of workplace violence through a decreased level of employee productivity and the potential for high employee turnover. Other affects on the enterprise can result from litigation generated by violent or threatening episodes and the ensuing adverse publicity.

To lessen the impact that workplace violence can have on a business, a corporate culture should be developed within the enterprise that includes open communication between management/supervisory personnel and the general workforce. Any plans or strategies that are developed to prevent workplace violence must include involvement from the entire workforce to be successful.

IV. What can be done to prevent workplace violence?

Although incidents of violence in the workplace can't be completely prevented or eliminated, there are a number of steps that can be taken to significantly reduce the likelihood of an occurrence. Some of these measures include implementing and adhering to a pre-employment screening process designed to alert employers of an applicants' propensity toward violent/criminal behavior. Introducing and following a Drug Free Workplace policy and establishing an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to aid potential alcohol or drug users will help curb the potential for workplace violence. Supervisory personnel should be trained in how to recognize potential violent behavior amongst their subordinates and be required to document and report such incidents. Some of the warning signs to detect potentially volatile employees include:

- Mental or emotional problems
- Low self-esteem
- Substance abuse
- Major changes in personality or interpersonal relationships
- A change in work performance
- Absenteeism
- Inability to accept criticism
- Bouts of erratic or violent behavior
- Intimidation of co-workers
- Talk of suicide or threats of harm to peers

A workplace violence prevention policy (preferably zero tolerance), that clearly identifies what types of behavior or actions are not acceptable in the workplace, should be created and maintained. For maximum effectiveness, such policies must receive strong and open support from both management and the employees. It is imperative that the

workplace violence prevention policy require that any Orders of Protection filed on behalf of an employee that name the workplace as a protected location immediately be brought to the attention of the Human Resources department. A Workplace Violence Prevention Team should also be formed and charged with reviewing all reports of incidents involving workplace violence. Members of this Team should typically be chosen from the Human Resources, Operations, Security, Legal and Medical/EAP segments of the work force. The physical security of the work facility should be reviewed and enhanced security procedures including notification measures and access control should be implemented.

Policies should universally apply to management, staff, and independent contract employees. Lastly, they should offer clear examples of unacceptable behaviors and present a plain illustration of the company's zero tolerance view of violent behavior in the workplace.



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AHPS Can Help

For assistance in the creation of a crisis plan for your business call American Heritage Protective Services toll free at 866-830-1800. Visit our website at www.ahpservices.com.