

A PMA Companies Thought Leadership Publication

Workplace Violence — Are You Prepared?

New Risks/New Approaches to Prevention

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In light of recent violent attacks in the U.S. and internationally, the challenge of protecting our workplaces has become even more urgent. The key is to implement a comprehensive workplace violence program that includes an understanding of potential threats and appropriate responses for each scenario.

In a 2005 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics study of establishments that had an incident of workplace violence in the prior 12 months, nearly 9% had no program or policy in place to address workplace violence.¹ A 2010 follow-up study of those with no program revealed as many as 70% of them still had not implemented a workplace violence program. Despite the sharp increase in the number of workplace violence incidents and the related media coverage, a large number of employers are still not adequately prepared to prevent, identify, or respond to acts of workplace violence.

Approximately 1.7 million incidences of workplace violence occur annually in the U.S.² While the majority of incidents are considered “minor” assaults, an average of 564 workplace homicides occurred each year from 2004 to 2008.³

According to the National Institute for the Prevention of Workplace Violence, Inc., U.S. businesses spend approximately \$121 billion annually responding to workplace violence events. Non-fatal assaults alone result in more than 876,000 lost workdays and \$16 million in lost wages. Workplace violence also results in lost productivity, contracts, and sales, clean-up or refurbishing costs, and increased insurance costs, lawsuits, and settlements, impacting the financial viability of organizations.

What is workplace violence?

Workplace violence is defined by the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) as “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.”⁴ While employees are generally considered the target of such violence, clients, customers, and visitors are affected as well.

Despite the sharp increase in the number of workplace violence incidents and the related media coverage, a large number of employers are still not adequately prepared to prevent, identify, or respond to acts of workplace violence.

Traditionally, workplace violence was thought to involve an employee attacking another worker or a disgruntled employee attacking a supervisor after being disciplined or terminated. However, the scope of potential attackers is broader. Four distinct categories for workplace violence have been established based on the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator:⁵

Type I – The offender has no relationship with the victim or workplace establishment.

Type II – The offender currently receives services from the workplace, often as a customer, client, patient, student, or other type of consumer.

Type III – The offender is either a current or former employee who is acting out toward co-workers, managers, or supervisors.

Type IV – The offender is not employed at the workplace, but has a personal relationship with an employee.

What are some of the warning signs? (From an employee perspective)

Oftentimes, there are clear warning signs indicating a problem is brewing. A violent act is almost never the initial event of disturbance, but the last. In many cases, the offender may have progressed through a continuum, starting with unusual behavior and acting out, and then advancing to verbal assault, harassment, threatening behavior, and physical assault.

Some warning signs indicating a worker is experiencing difficulties or anxieties that could lead to a violent encounter include an employee displaying one or more of the following traits:⁶

- Stress
- Believes nothing is his/her fault
- Experiences a sudden and detrimental change in appearance
- Has strained working relationships
- Was previously safety conscious and begins disregarding safety at work
- Has a fascination for weapons
- Is struggling with substance abuse (drugs or alcohol)
- Suffers from sudden mood swings
- Absent from work more frequently

Additional warning signs to consider about an employee include:⁷

- Is visibly upset over recent events or a personal crisis
- Makes threats or frequently holds grudges
- Is known for stalking or making co-workers feel uncomfortable
- Isolates themselves from others

None of these warning signs are conclusive indicators that a problem is brewing. However, it's important that employers are cognizant of changes in behavior in their workforce—and where it may lead.

Are my employees more susceptible because of the work they do?

Once you've assessed your facility's employees, the next step is to consider your employees in the context of their jobs. Certain factors—if left uncontrolled—may increase the likelihood that an employee may be assaulted by a customer, fellow employee, or an intentional perpetrator. Such factors include:⁸

- Contact with the public
- Exchange of money (with the public)
- Delivery of passengers, goods, or services
- Having a mobile workplace such as taxicab or police cruiser
- Working with unstable or volatile persons in healthcare, social service, or criminal justice settings
- Working alone or in small numbers
- Working late at night or during early morning hours
- Working in high-crime areas
- Guarding valuable property or possessions
- Working in community-based settings

A violent act is almost never the initial event of disturbance, but the last.

How do I determine if my facility is at risk?

Several factors⁹ are red flags that your facility may be at risk. Among the most common are:

- Ongoing or chronic labor/management issues
- Frequent grievances or unfair labor claims against the company
- Unusually high number of frivolous claims for work-related injuries
- Employees routinely working excessive overtime
- Excessive demands placed on employees (typically production related)
- Large number of overstressed employees
- A very rigid or overbearing management style
- Employees who feel they are not treated with dignity or respect

What can employers and employees do?

Regardless of an employer's actions to keep the workplace safe, risks still exist. Urge your employees to follow these steps to avoid violent acts:¹⁰

- Learn how to recognize, avoid, or diffuse potentially violent situations by attending personal safety training programs
- Alert supervisors to any concerns about safety or security and report all incidents immediately in writing
- Avoid traveling alone into unfamiliar locations or situations whenever possible
- Carry only minimal amounts of cash and required identifications into community settings

To most employers, identifying potential threats may appear overwhelming. Break the components into small, manageable areas to make the task less intimidating. Include the following in your action plan:¹¹

1. Enhance your pre-employment interview and selection process

- Ensure the candidate possesses the education, experience, and expertise required for the specific position

- Ensure the candidate has the ability (and tendency) to demonstrate the desired behaviors you expect
- Ensure the candidate has (and has demonstrated) the ability to work well and get along with others
- Check references adequately for every candidate
- Look for and identify any inconsistencies or significant gaps in the candidate's employment history (as provided on the employment application)
- Conduct criminal background checks and Motor Vehicle Report reviews
- Incorporate behavioral-based questions in your interview process

2. Create and implement workplace violence prevention strategies

- Design and implement a crisis plan
 - Conduct tabletop and/or mock drills of the crisis intervention and response plan
- Develop clear policies on violence, harassment, and substance abuse
 - Implement a zero-tolerance policy
 - Effectively communicate all policies to all employees
 - Establish an environment of "zero tolerance"
 - Clearly describe in the policies the range of aggressive behaviors that will not be tolerated in the workplace. Specify expectations for employees' behavior and what to do if they encounter behaviors of concern. Tailor the messages for employees and management.
 - All threats must be taken seriously
 - Establish complaint procedures for employees and/or customers. Communicate to employees that all reports of suspicious co-worker behavior will be treated confidentially. This will help to alleviate employees not reporting their suspicion for fear of retaliation.
 - Procedures must be clearly written, establishing and communicating the company's commitment to preventing violence
 - Establish procedures for handling threats
 - Clearly explain the reporting process and how to activate the response plan

- Conduct exit interviews for all employees leaving the company
 - Pay particular attention to the reason the employee offers for leaving
 - Closely watch their posture, facial expressions and physical characteristics, and vocal tone during the exit interview

Note: If trouble is detected as the employee is departing the facility/property, activate your workplace violence emergency response plan and call the authorities immediately.

- Review and update security programs and procedures
 - Conduct an assessment of your physical security systems
- Acquaint yourself with local law enforcement agencies
 - The actual event is not the time to “get acquainted”
 - Offer facility tours to local law enforcement and emergency response personnel

3. Provide training programs

- Establish and train a crisis response team
 - Designate responsibility to the team for developing and maintaining the company’s threat response plan
 - Team members must have the skills to make the right decisions at the right time
- Train personnel to recognize troubled employees and/or customers
 - The key is to focus on behaviors, not personalities
- Train personnel in conflict resolution
 - Provide employee safety education programs

4. Capitalize on external resources

- Provide assistance for employees through qualified counselor(s) or employee assistance programs
- Assure all employees are aware of available outside resources—and how to access each resource
- Offer outplacement services for displaced/terminated employees
- Provide post-trauma services

Escalating the risk: Responding to an active shooter

The potential for violence to escalate to an incident involving an active shooter must be considered. Unfortunately, once the shooter begins a deadly rampage, his/her focus may quickly expand to involve innocent bystanders.

In the workplace, shootings accounted for 78 percent of homicides in 2010. In two-thirds of workplace homicides, the assailant had no known personal relationship with the victims.¹² Employers and employees need to be prepared for an encounter with an active shooter.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) offers numerous resources on their website, **www.dhs.gov/active-shooter-preparedness** on dealing with active shooter incidents, including their manual, “Active Shooter: How to Respond.”

For resources dealing with active shooter incidents, visit:
www.dhs.gov/active-shooter-preparedness

According to the DHS website, there are three options in responding to a threat: run, hide, or fight (the last resort). View a brief (5:56) video, Run. Hide. Fight. from the FBI website, **<https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/office-of-partner-engagement/active-shooter-incidents/run-hide-fight-video>**. Consider showing the video to your employees as the initial step toward developing programs that prepare employees for dealing with workplace violence and active shooters.

Conclusion

Workplace violence continues to be a critical concern that every organization needs to take seriously. No organization is exempt from the potential of having an event erupt without notice, anywhere, anytime. Proper preparation for such events begins with effective planning, communications, training, and practice to ensure that all employees are well aware of the potential risks. Establishing programs to both prevent the potential for violence and to effectively deal with violent situations that may arise is vitally important.

PMA Companies urges employers to invest the time and resources needed to manage the risks associated with workplace violence. How well you've prepared your response to the event and your ability to execute appropriate measures quickly and effectively could significantly impact the severity of the loss you experience. Equally important is the comfort and well-being of employees knowing their employer has plans in place to ensure their safety and that of their co-workers.

Remember that as risks continue to evolve, plans should be reviewed and updated regularly. There are many data sources for employers to keep abreast of current information and expertise on workplace violence prevention. Assessing your own business, identifying potential risks, and planning an appropriate response are critical to the continued safety of your employees.

Additional Resources

Engineering & Safety Services Technical Reports (www.pmacompanies.com, Websource)

(Available for PMA clients, brokers, and agents)

New York State Department of Labor (www.labor.state.ny.us)

- Model Workplace Violence Prevention Plan
- Workplace Security Checklist

NIOSH Website (www.cdc.gov/niosh)

- Workplace Safety & Health Topics: Occupational Violence
- Risk Factors and Prevention Strategies

OSHA Website (www.osha.gov)

- Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Healthcare and Social Service Workers (3148-01R 2004)
- OSHA Safety and Health Topics: Workplace Violence

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (dhs.gov)

- Excellent reference materials regarding Active Shooter Program Development, Management Commitment, and Employee Training

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About the Author

Robert Bowman is the Regional Risk Control Manager for PMA Companies New York and the New England states. During his 35-year career in occupational health and safety, he has focused on helping clients cultivate safe workplace environments and implement effective safety cultures.

He serves as chairman of PMA Companies' Organizational Improvement Group, Educational Focus Group, and Decision-Based Safety Management Assessment Team. An expert in Adult Learning, Mr. Bowman has developed a multitude of management training curriculums, including Attribute Based Interviewing, Goal Setting for Improved Performance and Effective Safety Leadership.

Mr. Bowman is a graduate of Plattsburgh State University with a B.S. in Health Education, and he holds a Master's degree in Occupational Health & Safety Management from Indiana State University.

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