



DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM AND POLICY

The first priority in developing a workplace violence prevention policy is to establish a system for documenting violent incidents in the workplace. Such data are essential for assessing the nature and magnitude of workplace violence in a given workplace and quantifying risk. These data can be used to assess the need for action to reduce or mitigate the risks for workplace violence and implement a reasonable intervention strategy. An existing intervention strategy may be identified within an industry or in similar industries, or new and unique strategies may be needed to address the risks in a given workplace or setting. Implementation of the reporting system, a workplace violence prevention policy, and specific prevention strategies should be publicized company-wide, and appropriate training sessions should be scheduled. The demonstrated commitment of management is crucial to the success of the program. The success and appropriateness of intervention strategies can be monitored and adjusted with continued data collection.

A written workplace violence policy should clearly indicate a zero tolerance of violence at work, whether the violence originates inside or outside the workplace. Just as workplaces have developed mechanisms for reporting and dealing with sexual harassment, they must also develop threat assessment teams to which threats and violent incidents can be reported. These teams should include representatives from human resources, security, employee assistance, unions, workers, management, and perhaps legal and public relations departments. The charge to this team is to assess threats of violence (e.g., to determine how specific a threat is, whether the person threatening the worker has the means for carrying out the threat, etc.) and to determine what steps are necessary to prevent the threat from being carried out. This team should also be charged with periodic reviews of violent incidents to identify ways in which similar incidents can be prevented in the future. Note that when violence or the threat of violence occurs among coworkers, firing the perpetrator may or may not be the most appropriate way to reduce the risk for additional or future violence. The employer may want to retain some control over the perpetrator and require or provide counseling or other care, if appropriate. The violence prevention policy should explicitly state the consequences of making threats or committing acts of violence in the workplace.

A comprehensive workplace violence prevention policy and program should also include procedures and responsibilities to be taken in the event of a violent incident in the workplace. This policy should explicitly state how the response team is to be assembled and who is responsible for immediate care of the victim(s), re-establishing work areas and processes, and organizing and carrying out stress debriefing sessions with victims, their coworkers, and perhaps the families of victims and coworkers. Employee assistance programs, human resource professionals, and local mental health and emergency service personnel can offer assistance in developing these strategies.

Responding to an Immediate Threat of Workplace Violence

For a situation that poses an immediate threat of workplace violence, all legal, human resource, employee assistance, community mental health, and law enforcement resources should be used to develop a response.

The risk of injury to all workers should be minimized. If a threat has been made that refers to particular times and places, or if the potential offender is knowledgeable about workplace procedures and time frames, patterns may need to be shifted. For example, a person who has leveled a threat against a worker may indicate, "I know where you park and what time you get off work!" In such a case, it may be advisable to change or even stagger departure times and implement a buddy system or an escort by security guard for leaving the building and getting to parking areas. The threat should not be ignored in the hope that it will resolve itself or out of fear of triggering an outburst from the person who has lodged the threat. If someone poses a danger to himself or others, appropriate authorities should be notified and action should be taken.

Dealing with the Consequences of Workplace Violence

Much discussion has also centered around the role of stress in workplace violence. The most important thing to remember is that stress can be both a cause and an effect of workplace violence. That is, high levels of stress may lead to violence in the workplace, but a violent incident in the workplace will most certainly lead to stress, perhaps even to post-traumatic stress disorder. The data from the National Crime Victimization Survey [Bachman 1994] present compelling evidence (more than a million workdays lost as a result of workplace assaults each year) for the need to be aware of the impact of workplace violence. Employers should therefore be sensitive to the effects of workplace violence and provide an environment that promotes open communication; they should also have in place an established procedure for reporting and responding to violence. Appropriate referrals to employee assistance programs or other local mental health services may be appropriate for stress debriefing sessions after critical incidents.



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