VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Workplace violence can range from verbal or physical threats or intimidation to assault and battery. Workplace assaults result in thousands of injuries and hundreds of fatalities each year. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the United States Office of Personnel Management, and several states have issued guidelines and preventative strategies for the control of workplace violence. This chapter will suggest ways for you to prevent violence at your job and ways to respond to violence if it should occur.

SOURCES OF VIOLENCE

Occasionally, violence occurs from within an organization. When disputes among co-workers, supervisors, and management go unresolved, arguments, threats, harassment, vandalism, arson, assault, or other violent acts can be the result.

The greatest risk of work-related homicide comes from violence inflicted by third parties, such as robbers and muggers. Risks have been identified with workplaces involved in dealing with the public; exchanging money or guarding valuables; delivering passengers, goods, or services; working out of a mobile worksite (taxicab or police cruiser); working with unstable or volatile persons in health care or social service settings; working late at night or early in the morning; working alone or in small numbers; or working in high crime areas.

RECOGNIZE POTENTIALLY VIOLENT SITUATIONS

Learn to recognize situations that could result in violence. Often a co-worker, customer, or client will express troubled feelings before becoming angry or violent. Many times, listening and concern is all that is needed at the early stages of trouble. If you sense that the problem will get worse, or if someone threatens you, take it seriously and report the incident to your supervisor.

Be aware of places where an assailant could hide, and be leery of someone who is loitering or does not belong in the workplace.

TAKE PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

When you have to work alone or in a small isolated group, use the "buddy system" or ask for an escort. Radios or cellular phones can help you to stay in touch. If you travel between work sites, call to check in so your co-workers know where you are, and keep your vehicle well maintained to avoid breakdowns. When walking to your vehicle, have your keys ready, stay in well-lit areas, appear confident, and avoid hiding spots or threatening strangers.

Look in and around your vehicle before getting in, and lock your doors before you start your vehicle. If you are followed or threatened along the way, keep going to the closest safe area to report the threat to the police.

Many workplaces have key-card access systems and have employees wear identification badges. Visitors have to check in to get a pass before they are allowed inside. Know who is, and who isn't, supposed to be in your work area. If you are working with the public, limit your customers or clients to using doorways that can be seen by workers.

Maintain good visibility in your workplace. Windows and mirrors help eliminate hiding spots. Windows also help police or security guards to see in and check on your safety. Good lighting inside and out will deter criminals.

Video cameras, alarms, metal detectors, and security patrols reduce crime. Use drop safes and post signs to show that little cash is on-hand. Vary the schedules for money drops and pickups to make it harder on robbers. Keep valuable personal items locked up or at home. Counters and windows act as physical barriers between workers and potential attackers.

HANDLING A VIOLENT SITUATION

If you become involved in a violent situation:

- Report threats or suspicious activity to your supervisors or the police. Keep your distance from the situation. Stay safe, and let the authorities handle it.
- If you are confronted, talk to the person. Stay calm, maintain eye contact, stall for time, and cooperate. If you are threatened by a weapon, freeze in place. Never try to grab a weapon.
- Attempts for escape from a confrontation should be to the closest secure area where you can quickly contact others and get help.
- Telephoned threats, like any threat, must be taken seriously. Write down as much detail as you can about the caller - accent, pitch of voice, background noise, etc. Immediately report the call to your supervisors or the police.

AFTER VIOLENCE OCCURS

Any violent act upsets people. You can be proactive and think ahead to have a plan on how to react after a violent incident. Some items that your organization will want to be prepared for are:

- Getting medical attention for anyone who was hurt during the incident.
- Reporting the incident to supervisors and/or the police.

- Securing the area so evidence is not disturbed.
- Identifying witnesses and interviewing them to get detailed notes on what happened.
- Analyzing what happened and making plans to prevent it from being repeated.
- Conducting employee assistance counseling or debriefing sessions to help employees reduce stress and fear so they can better understand and handle the situation.

WORK AT WORKING SAFELY

1. Follow your facility's security guidelines.
2. Report suspicious activity. Don't take matters into your own hands.
3. Take steps for personal safety when you're alone or at risk.
4. Stay calm in a violent situation.
5. After a violent incident, talk about it to reduce stress and fear.