

Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Health Care and Social Service Workers



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Records Analysis and Tracking

This activity should include reviewing medical, safety, workers' compensation and insurance records—including the OSHA 200 log, if required—to pinpoint instances of workplace violence. Scan unit logs and employee and police reports of incidents or near-incident of assaultive behavior to identify and analyze trends in assaults relative to particular departments, units, job titles, unit activities, work stations, and/or time of day. Tabulate these data to target the frequency and severity of incidents to establish a baseline for measuring improvement.

Monitoring Trends and Analyzing Incidents

Contacting similar local businesses, trade associations, and community and civic groups is one way to learn about their experiences with workplace violence and to help identify trends. Use several years of data, if possible, to trace trends of injuries and incidents of actual or potential workplace violence.

Screening Surveys

One important screening tool is to give employees a questionnaire or survey to get their ideas on the potential for violent incidents and to identify or confirm the need for improved security measures. Detailed baseline screening surveys can help pinpoint tasks that put employees at risk. Periodic surveys—conducted at least annually or whenever operations change or incidents of workplace violence occur—help identify new or previously unnoticed risk factors and deficiencies or failures in work practices, procedures, or controls. Also, the surveys help assess the effects of changes in the work processes (see Appendix A for a sample survey used in the State of Washington). The periodic review process should also include feedback and followup.

Independent reviewers, such as safety and health professionals, law enforcement or security specialists, insurance safety auditors, and other qualified persons may offer advice to strengthen programs. These experts also can provide fresh perspectives to improve a violence prevention program.

Workplace Security Analysis

The team or coordinator should periodically inspect the workplace and evaluate employee tasks to identify hazards, conditions, operations, and situations that could lead to violence.

To find areas requiring further evaluation, the team or coordinator should do the following:

- Analyze incidents, including the characteristics of assailants and victims, an account of what happened before and during the incident, and the relevant

details of the situation and its outcome. When possible, obtain police reports and recommendations.

- Identify jobs or locations with the greatest risk of violence as well as processes and procedures that put employees at risk of assault, including how often and when.
- Note high-risk factors such as types of clients or patients (e.g., psychiatric conditions or patients disoriented by drugs, alcohol, or stress); physical risk factors of the building; isolated locations/job activities; lighting problems; lack of phones and other communication devices, areas of easy, unsecured access; and areas with previous security problems. (See sample checklist for assessing hazards in Appendix B.)
- Evaluate the effectiveness of existing security measures, including engineering control measures. Determine if risk factors have been reduced or eliminated, and take appropriate action.

Hazard Prevention and Control

After hazards of violence are identified through the systematic worksite analysis, the next step is to design measures through engineering or administrative and work practices to prevent or control these hazards. If violence does occur, post-incident response can be an important tool in preventing future incidents.

Engineering Controls and Workplace Adaptation

Engineering controls, for example, remove the hazard from the workplace or create a barrier between the worker and the hazard. There are several measures that can effectively prevent or control workplace hazards, such as those actions presented in the following paragraphs. The selection of any measure, of course, should be based upon the hazards identified in the workplace security analysis of each facility.

- Assess any plans for new construction or physical changes to the facility or workplace to eliminate or reduce security hazards.
- Install and regularly maintain alarm systems and other security devices, panic buttons, hand-held alarms or noise devices, cellular phones, and private channel radios where risk is apparent or may be anticipated, and arrange for a reliable response system when an alarm is triggered.
- Provide metal detectors—installed or hand-held, where appropriate—to identify guns, knives, or other weapons, according to the recommendations of security consultants.

- Use a closed-circuit video recording for high-risk areas on a 24-hour basis. Public safety is a greater concern than privacy in these situations.
- Place curved mirrors at hallway intersections or concealed areas.
- Enclose nurses' stations, and install deep service counters or bullet-resistant, shatter-proof glass in reception areas, triage, admitting, or client service rooms.
- Provide employee "safe rooms" for use during emergencies.
- Establish "time-out" or seclusion areas with high ceilings without grids for patients acting out and establish separate rooms for criminal patients.
- Provide client or patient waiting rooms designed to maximize comfort and minimize stress.
- Ensure that counseling or patient care rooms have two exits.
- Limit access to staff counseling rooms and treatment rooms controlled by using locked doors.
- Arrange furniture to prevent entrapment of staff. In interview rooms or crisis treatment areas, furniture should be minimal, lightweight, without sharp corners or edges, and/or affixed to the floor. Limit the number of pictures, vases, ashtrays, or other items that can be used as weapons.
- Provide lockable and secure bathrooms for staff members separate from patient-client, and visitor facilities.
- Lock all unused doors to limit access, in accordance with local fire codes.
- Install bright, effective lighting indoors and outdoors.
- Replace burned-out lights, broken windows, and locks.
- Keep automobiles, if used in the field, well-maintained. Always lock automobiles.
- Require employees to report all assaults or threats to a supervisor or manager (e.g., can be confidential interview). Keep log books and reports of such incidents to help in determining any necessary actions to prevent further occurrences.
- Advise and assist employees, if needed, of company procedures for requesting police assistance or filing charges when assaulted.
- Provide management support during emergencies. Respond promptly to all complaints.
- Set up a trained response team to respond to emergencies.
- Use properly trained security officers, when necessary, to deal with aggressive behavior. Follow written security procedures.
- Ensure adequate and properly trained staff for restraining patients or clients.
- Provide sensitive and timely information to persons waiting in line or in waiting rooms. Adopt measures to decrease waiting time.
- Ensure adequate and qualified staff coverage at all times. Times of greatest risk occur during patient transfers, emergency responses, meal times, and at night. Locales with the greatest risk include admission units and crisis or acute care units. Other risks include admission of patients with a history of violent behavior or gang activity.
- Institute a sign-in procedure with passes for visitors, especially in a newborn nursery or pediatric department. Enforce visitor hours and procedures.
- Establish a list of "restricted visitors" for patients with a history of violence. Copies should be available at security checkpoints, nurses' stations, and visitor sign-in areas. Review and revise visitor check systems, when necessary. Limit information given to outsiders on hospitalized victims of violence.
- Supervise the movement of psychiatric clients and patients throughout the facility.

Administrative and Work Practice Controls

Administrative and work practice controls affect the way jobs or tasks are performed. The following examples illustrate how changes in work practices and administrative procedures can help prevent violent incidents.

- State clearly to patients, clients, and employees that violence is not permitted or tolerated.
- Establish liaison with local police and state prosecutors. Report all incidents of violence. Provide police with physical layouts of facilities to expedite investigations.
- Prohibit employees from working alone in emergency areas or walk-in clinics, particularly at night or when assistance is unavailable. Employees should never enter seclusion rooms alone.
- Establish policies and procedures for secured areas, and emergency evacuations, and for monitoring high-risk patients at night (e.g., open versus locked seclusion).
- Ascertain the behavioral history of new and transferred patients to learn about any past violent or assaultive behaviors. Establish a system—such as chart tags, log books, or verbal census reports—to

identify patients and clients with assaultive behavior problems, keeping in mind patient confidentiality and worker safety issues. Update as needed.

- Treat and/or interview aggressive or agitated clients in relatively open areas that still maintain privacy and confidentiality (e.g., rooms with removable partitions).
- Use case management conferences with co-workers and supervisors to discuss ways to effectively treat potentially violent patients.
- Prepare contingency plans to treat clients who are "acting out" or making verbal or physical attacks or threats. Consider using certified employee assistance professionals (CEAPs) or in-house social service or occupational health service staff to help diffuse patient or client anger.
- Transfer assaultive clients to "acute care units," "criminal units," or other more restrictive settings.
- Make sure that nurses and/or physicians are not alone when performing intimate physical examinations of patients.
- Discourage employees from wearing jewelry to help prevent possible strangulation in confrontational situations. Community workers should carry only required identification and money.
- Periodically survey the facility to remove tools or possessions left by visitors or maintenance staff which could be used inappropriately by patients.
- Provide staff with identification badges, preferably without last names, to readily verify employment.
- Discourage employees from carrying keys, pens, or other items that could be used as weapons.
- Provide staff members with security escorts to parking areas in evening or late hours. Parking areas should be highly visible, well-lighted, and safely accessible to the building.
- Use the "buddy system," especially when personal safety may be threatened. Encourage home health care providers, social service workers, and others to avoid threatening situations. Staff should exercise extra care in elevators, stairwells and unfamiliar residences; immediately leave premises if there is a hazardous situation; or request police escort if needed.
- Develop policies and procedures covering home health care providers, such as contracts on how visits will be conducted, the presence of others in the home during the visits, and the refusal to provide services in a clearly hazardous situation.

- Establish a daily work plan for field staff to keep a designated contact person informed about workers' whereabouts throughout the workday. If an employee does not report in, the contact person should followup.
- Conduct a comprehensive post-incident evaluation, including psychological as well as medical treatment, for employees who have been subjected to abusive behavior.

Post-Incident Response

Post-incident response and evaluation are essential to an effective violence prevention program. All workplace violence programs should provide comprehensive treatment for victimized employees and employees who may be traumatized by witnessing a workplace violence incident. Injured staff should receive prompt treatment and psychological evaluation whenever an assault takes place, regardless of severity. (See sample hospital policy in Appendix C). Transportation of the injured to medical care should be provided if care is not available on-site.

Victims of workplace violence suffer a variety of consequences in addition to their actual physical injuries. These include short and long-term psychological trauma, fear of returning to work, changes in relationships with co-workers and family, feelings of incompetence, guilt, powerlessness, and fear of criticism by supervisors or managers. Consequently, a strong followup program for these employees will not only help them to deal with these problems but also to help prepare them to confront or prevent future incidents of violence (Flannery, 1991, 1993; 1995).

There are several types of assistance that can be incorporated into the post-incident response. For example, trauma-crisis counseling, critical incident stress debriefing, or employee assistance programs may be provided to assist victims. Certified employee assistance professionals, psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical nurse specialists, or social workers could provide this counseling, or the employer can refer staff victims to an outside specialist. In addition, an employee counseling service, peer counseling, or support groups may be established.

In any case, counselors must be well trained and have a good understanding of the issues and consequences of assaults and other aggressive, violent behavior. Appropriate and promptly rendered post-incident debriefings and counseling reduce acute psychological trauma and general stress levels among victims and witnesses. In addition, such counseling educates staff about workplace violence and positively influences workplace and organizational cultural norms to reduce trauma associated with future incidents.

Recordkeeping and Evaluation of the Program

Recordkeeping and evaluation of the violence prevention program are necessary to determine overall effectiveness and identify any deficiencies or changes that should be made.

Recordkeeping

Recordkeeping is essential to the success of a workplace violence prevention program. Good records help employers determine the severity of the problem, evaluate methods of hazard control, and identify training needs. Records can be especially useful to large organizations and for members of a business group or trade association who "pool" data. Records of injuries, illnesses, accidents, assaults, hazards, corrective actions, patient histories, and training, among others, can help identify problems and solutions for an effective program.

The following records are important:

- OSHA Log of Injury and Illness (OSHA 200). OSHA regulations require entry on the Injury and Illness Log of any injury that requires more than first aid, is a lost-time injury, requires modified duty, or causes loss of consciousness.⁹ (This applies only to establishments required to keep OSHA logs.) Injuries caused by assaults, which are otherwise recordable, also must be entered on the log. A fatality or catastrophe that results in the hospitalization of 3 or more employees must be reported to OSHA within 8 hours. This includes those resulting from workplace violence and applies to all establishments.
- Medical reports of work injury and supervisors' reports for each recorded assault should be kept. These records should describe the type of assault, i.e., unprovoked sudden attack or patient-to-patient altercation; who was assaulted; and all other circumstances of the incident. The records should include a description of the environment or location, potential or actual cost, lost time, and the nature of injuries sustained.
- Incidents of abuse, verbal attacks or aggressive behavior—which may be threatening to the worker but do not result in injury, such as pushing or

shouting and acts of aggression towards other clients—should be recorded, perhaps as part of an assaultive incident report. These reports should be evaluated routinely by the affected department. (See sample incident forms in Appendix D).

- Information on patients with a history of past violence, drug abuse, or criminal activity should be recorded on the patient's chart. All staff who care for a potentially aggressive, abusive, or violent client should be aware of their background and history. Admission of violent clients should be logged to help determine potential risks.
- Minutes of safety meetings, records of hazard analyses, and corrective actions recommended and taken should be documented.
- Records of all training programs, attendees, and qualifications of trainers should be maintained.

Evaluation

As part of their overall program, employers should evaluate their safety and security measures. Top management should review the program regularly, and with each incident, to evaluate program success. Responsible parties (managers, supervisors, and employees) should collectively reevaluate policies and procedures on a regular basis. Deficiencies should be identified and corrective action taken.

An evaluation program should involve the following:

- Establishing a uniform violence reporting system and regular review of reports.
- Reviewing reports and minutes from staff meetings on safety and security issues.
- Analyzing trends and rates in illness/injury or fatalities caused by violence relative to initial or "baseline" rates.
- Measuring improvement based on lowering the frequency and severity of workplace violence.
- Keeping up-to-date records of administrative and work practice changes to prevent workplace violence to evaluate their effectiveness.
- Surveying employees before and after making job or worksite changes or installing security measures or new systems to determine their effectiveness.
- Keeping abreast of new strategies available to deal with violence in the health care and social service fields as these develop.
- Surveying employees who experience hostile situations about the medical treatment they received initially and, again, several weeks afterward, and then several months later.

⁹The Occupational Safety and Health Act and recordkeeping regulations in *Title 29 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 1904* provide specific recording requirements that comprise the framework of the occupational safety and health recording system (BLS, 1986a). BLS has issued guidelines that provide official Agency interpretations concerning the recordkeeping and reporting of occupational injuries and illnesses (BLS, 1986b).