

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of September 5, 2017 – Workplace Violence

Workplace violence (WPV) is defined as any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and homicide. It can affect and involve employees, clients, customers and visitors. At present, homicide is the fourth-leading cause of fatal occupational injuries in the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI), of the 4,679 fatal workplace injuries that occurred in the United States in 2014, 403 were workplace homicides. Thus, WPV is a major concern for employers and employees nationwide.

The fact is, nearly 2 million American workers report having been victims of WPV each year. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), workplace violence comprise 18% of all violent crime in the U.S. Assaults and violent acts are the 10th leading cause of nonfatal occupational injury (information collected by Liberty Mutual for 2002), costing an estimated \$400 million. From 1992 to 2004, there were an average 807 workplace homicides in the U.S. Yet, many more cases go unreported.

Research has identified factors that may increase the risk of violence for some workers at specific worksites. Such factors include exchanging money with the public and working with volatile, unstable people. Working alone or in isolated areas may also contribute to the potential for violence. Providing services and care, and working where alcohol is served may also impact the likelihood of violence. Additionally, time of day and location of work, such as working late at night or in areas with high crime rates, are also risk factors that should be considered when addressing issues of WPV.

In most workplaces where risk factors can be identified, the risk of assault can be prevented or minimized if employers take appropriate precautions. This is typical of workplace hazards in general: if the hazard is recognized, the controls can be implemented. One of the best protections employers can offer their workers is to establish a zero-tolerance policy toward WPV. This policy should cover all workers, patients, clients, visitors, contractors, and anyone else who may come in contact with company personnel.

By assessing worksites, employers can identify methods for reducing the likelihood of incidents. OSHA believes that a well-written and implemented workplace violence prevention program, combined with engineering controls, administrative controls and training can reduce the incidence of WPV in both the private sector and federal workplaces.

Corporate WPV programs can be a separate program or can be incorporated into a safety and health program, employee handbook, or manual of standard operating procedures. It is critical to ensure that all workers know the policy and understand that all claims of WPV will be investigated and remedied promptly.

In addition, OSHA encourages employers to develop additional methods as necessary to protect employees in high risk industries. Among those with higher-risk are workers who exchange money with the public, delivery drivers, healthcare professionals, public service workers, customer service agents, law enforcement personnel, and those who work alone or in small groups.



WPV is now divided into four classifications:

- 1) Criminal intent: This accounts for 85% of workplace homicides. Here, the perpetrator has no legitimate relationship to the business of employee. Such cases include robbery, shoplifting, and terrorism.
- 2) Customer/Client: The perpetrator has a relationship with the business and violence erupts while being served by the business. This category includes customers, patients and students and other groups in which a business is providing service.
- 3) Worker-on-worker: Here an employee or past employee of a business attacks or threatens, another employee.
- 4) Personal relationship: The perpetrator does not have a relationship with a business, but has one with the intended victim. This includes domestic violence where the act of assault or threat occurs at the workplace.

Of these classifications, it is the third category, worker-on-worker, that most people think of when they hear the term “workplace.”

According to the NIOSH publication, *Workplace Violence Prevention Strategies and Research Needs*, it seems that there is a difficulty to identify, document, assess, prevent and communicate workplace violence events. A number of barriers that are preventing proper control of WPV include a corporate attitude of denial as well as a lack of communication/training and resources as well as reporting and follow-up to reported WPV events.

Aside from WPV factors associated within the immediate workplace, it cannot be ignored that we live in a culture of violence which permeates into many areas of our lives. Without a doubt, what happened in Charlottesville, Virginia last month was an obvious display of this very concern (of course there is also the terrorist elements that we see almost on a daily basis throughout the world). So quite possibly, the stem of WPV may fall outside the traditional work setting, and rather, come from the much larger, encompassing set. That is, our society. If this is really the case, then how can WPV be addressed through occupational controls? Quite possibly a larger, global approach is necessary.

Nevertheless, no matter how extensive violence outside the occupational setting may be, it is apparent, that there are positive steps which can be initiated and practiced within the workplace. First off, NIOSH has recognized that many organizations do not have a written policy for WPV that is tailored to the organization’s needs. Fundamentals such as defining what constitutes WPV (which typically includes physical and verbal behaviors), as well as specific consequences for those actions, need to be addressed. A critical aspect of any program is the mechanism needed to support affected employees. That is, how does an organization address complaints, including follow-up processes to ensure the situation has not been forgotten and has indeed, been properly remedied. Of course specific definitions of terms as well as training need to be strongly emphasized. While these aspects are a foundation for any corporate WPV program, it is apparent that further understanding into the motivation behind such acts need to be the pillar of any program that attempts to effectively address WPV.

Aim for the moon. If you miss, you may hit a star - W. Clement Stone

