Violence in the workplace

Employers are under obligation to provide safe and healthy workplaces and employees are also obliged to take reasonable care at work. Violence in the workplace is not acceptable. This information bulletin provides practical steps for addressing violence in the workplace.

What is violence at work?

The expression of violence takes many forms, ranging from physical assault and verbal abuse to intimidation and low level threatening behaviour.

The term 'violence at work' applies to 'any incident in which employees and others are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances arising out of, or in the course of work undertaken. This also includes employers, self-employed people and any other person who may be affected by a violent incident in the workplace.

It is important to recognise that violence is a workplace hazard, and reasonably practicable steps should be taken to protect employees and others in the workplace from violent incidents.

Violence at work can happen in a variety of workplaces. It may cause mental and physical pain and suffering, and may result in permanent disability or even death.

Employees may be exposed to various forms of violence and threatening behaviour. The violence may come from members of the public, students, patients or clients, or from supervisors, managers or other workers.

Working alone or at night may increase Risk

Recent workers' compensation figures indicate that 74% of workplace assaults in Western Australia occurred in the community services industry. More than half of the assaults were to nurses, social workers, guards, security officers and prison officers

Forms of violence such as verbal abuse, intimidation and threatening behaviour not resulting in physical injury are difficult to quantify, but may have significant effects upon the psychological well being of employees.

Employees who deal with members of the public in service industries and government agencies are likely to be exposed to these forms of violence.

The threat of robbery or attack is a significant factor for employees who handle such items as cash or drugs.

Why reduce the risk of violence and aggression at work?

There are costs associated with workplace violence. As well as the financial costs of absenteeism, lost productivity, higher workers' compensation insurance premiums and medical expenses, there is the personal cost of emotional trauma suffered by the victims and their families.

Even the potential risk of violence, threats or abuse in a workplace can cause stress and emotional suffering. Both employers and employees can benefit from reducing the risk of violence at work.

There are obligations under the *Workplace Health and Safety Act* requiring employers to provide safe and healthy workplaces. These laws mean that all practicable measures should be taken to reduce risks associated with violence at work, as for any other hazard.

Employees also have a duty under the Act to take reasonable care at work, and this includes reporting situations where there is potential for violence, so that action can be taken by the employer to ensure a safe system of work.

What causes violence at work?

It is difficult to find a reason for every violent outburst, but there are some common factors that may apply to workplaces. There is often a combination of personal and environmental factors influencing the situation.

Violent, abusive or threatening behaviour at work may occur for different reasons, for example:

- random violence with no clear intent, such as from a disturbed person or patient, or from someone under the influence of alcohol or other drugs;

- intimidation, used to achieve a desired end, such as faster service;

- the expression of uncontrolled irritation, such as a dissatisfaction with poor service or prolonged discomfort;

- displaced anger from past or non-work-related situations, applied unreasonably to the issue at hand;

- related to criminal activity, thrill-seeking or revenge; and

- related to cultural or religious difference between subgroups in society.

Management plans to reduce the risk of violence at work

Prepare a management plan that identifies the potential for threatening or violent incidents at work that may result in injury or harm to the health of employees and others at the workplace. A plan to manage violence at work should be prepared in consultation with employees and health and safety representatives, or a health and safety committee.

Then assess and control the risk of violence in your workplace. It may be appropriate to seek specialist assistance, eg security agents, police or support services.

The recommended approach to the management of violence at work is to eliminate the opportunity for violent or threatening behaviour to occur. Initiatives that provide additional personal protection, such as personal alarms or self-defence training, may assist in minimising the risk of injury or harm to health.

Steps to developing a Management Plan to reduce violence at work

A management plan should include the following steps:

1) ***Identify* types and areas of work where employees are likely to be exposed to some form of violence.** This may include:

- reviewing incident report records;

- gathering information from people at the workplace on past incidents involving violent, threatening or abusive behaviour;

- providing information to staff to increase awareness of violence as a hazard, and to help them to recognise incidents that should be reported;

- assigning a particular person in the organisation to deal with inquiries and report of violent incidents; and

- providing a confidential means of reporting violent incidents for those employees who may require it.

2) *Assess* **the nature and the extent of the problem throughout the workplace.**

This applies to the obvious high-profile threats and risk of physical attack, as well as the low-level forms of threat and intimidation.

Assessing the problem should involve analysing information gathered on violent incidents to determine and understand reasons for:

- similarity between incidents, patterns of behaviour;

- underlying causes of violent behaviour;

- nature of the violence – whether physical assault, threatening behaviour, intimidation or verbal abuse;

- who is at risk of injury or harm – including clients, customers, patients or members of the public;

- frequency of the incidents; and

- staff perception of their safety or exposure to violence.

3) *Control* **the situation by finding ways of preventing the type of violent incidents that have been identified in each work area.**

Introducing new ways of managing violent and threatening behaviour will be easier and more effective if employees are actively involved in bringing about change that will affect their work.

Specific actions may include:

- changes to the work environment, eg redesigning waiting areas to provide welcoming, calming surroundings, installing security lighting and protective barriers, improving surveillance and visibility of offending behaviour, reducing irritating background noise.

- changes to the system of work to limit the opportunity for violent and threatening behaviour, eg improving cash handling procedures, rostering experienced staff, rostering more staff at peak periods to reduce stress, setting realistic deadlines; and

- providing information, training and supervision to improve each employee's ability to identify potentially violent situations and take appropriate action.

Back-up

Where it is not practicable to completely eliminate all opportunities for violent and threatening behaviour, the management plan should include back-up procedures to be followed before and when violent or threatening situations occur.

These may involve:

- selecting appropriate staff, who have clear guidelines to follow;

- induction training for new employees in the work area where an incident may occur;

- training in interpersonal skills to improve each employee's ability to diffuse potential violence;

- a system for alerting co-workers or the police, that urgent help is required;

- additional personal protection, such as personal alarms and self-defence training;

- procedures for the victim and offers to follow if verbal or physical abuse occurs; and

- victim support services for employees involved in violent incidents at work to manage the impact of crisis situations and developing skills for handling violent incidents in the future.

Monitor

Monitor the results of changes that have been introduced to reduce the risk of violence, using a system where employees can provide regular feedback, and make more modifications as necessary.

Careful monitoring of a potentially threatening or violent situation allows the effects of each change to be assessed. In addition, it ensures that any remaining problem or change in the nature of the problem can be identified.

Review

Review the management plan on a regular basis as part of the safety management process, and after any specific incidents. Appropriate preventive measures will depend on the nature of each problem, but it is likely that a combination of measures will be needed to reduce the risk.

For further information please contact NT WorkSafe on 1800 019 115 or go to worksafe.nt.gov.au