

Avoid Violence in the Workplace

Direct contact with the public is a necessary component of work in the hospitality and entertainment industry, exposing your employees to an elevated risk of becoming victims of workplace violence. Although it is crucial to take steps to protect your employees from hostile customers and intruders, it is important to remember that many incidents of workplace violence consist in less obvious – but equally worrisome – activity by co-workers. This includes threats of physical violence, harassment, intimidation or other threatening, disruptive behavior. And while failing to adequately prevent and cope with all types of violent incidents in the workplace can lead to increased workers' compensation costs, absenteeism, property damage and negative publicity, over 70 percent of U.S. workplaces do not have a formal policy or program addressing workplace violence, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Recognizing the risk of workplace violence and taking action is essential.

Classifying Violence

Workplace violence can be defined as violent acts directed towards a person at work or on duty. These acts are classified into four types of situations:

1. Criminal – the perpetrator has no legitimate relationship to the business or its employees and generally commits a crime in conjunction with the violence (shoplifting, robbery, trespassing).
2. Customer or Client – the perpetrator has a legitimate relationship with the business and becomes violent while being served by the business (clients, customers).
3. Co-worker – the perpetrator is a current or past employee, or is a contractor who works as a temporary employee of the business.
4. Domestic Violence – the perpetrator has no legitimate relationship with the business but has a personal relationship with a victim, and threatens or assaults him or her at the workplace (family member, boyfriend, girlfriend).

There are many actions you can take to protect your employees and mitigate the risk of workplace violence.

Risk on the Job

Certain job duties and characteristics of the workplace make working in hospitality particularly risky. Risk factors include:

- Contact with the public
- Exchange of money and use of cash register
- Working with inebriated customers
- Working alone or in small numbers
- Working late at night or during early morning hours
- Ease of escape for criminals

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- Working in high-crime areas
- Presence of valuable objects
- Working in public, community-based settings

Take Action

There are actions that you can take to protect your employees and mitigate the risk of workplace violence. Evaluate the workplace and identify both physical and administrative adjustments that you can make to lower the risk of a violent incident.

Designing a Safe Environment

- Protect your employees using cash-handling policies such as locked drop safes, limited amounts of cash to carry, and notices to visitors or clients that limited cash is available.
- Explore the use of cashless transactions, and if feasible, install them.
- Install bullet-resistant barriers or enclosures with appropriately high and deep counters where interaction with the public is necessary.
- Provide and maintain good lighting, both internally and externally.
- Limit the number of unlocked entrances and hiding places in and around the perimeter of the workplace.
- Design buildings and parking areas so that they do not have hiding places.
- Place garbage areas, outdoor refrigeration areas and other storage facilities in a way that does not unnecessarily expose employees by forcing them to walk distances alone or in poorly lit areas.
- Make use of security devices such as closed-circuit cameras, alarms, card-key access systems, panic-bar doors locked from the outside and geographic locating devices in mobile workplaces.

Other Administrative Actions

- When possible, increase the number of staff on duty at opening and closing hours
- Review work practices and staffing during money drops and pickups.
- Consider the risk of assault when directing workers to take out garbage, dispose of grease, store items in external areas and transport money.
- Institute policies and procedures that indicate a zero tolerance of workplace violence and provide direction for reporting and handling incidents.
- Provide training in defusing or de-escalating potentially violent situations, and inform employees of the risks of workplace violence.
- Establish procedures for obtaining medical care and psychological support after a violent incident.
- Establish a crisis response plan that describes procedures to follow in the event of an emergency.
- Establish an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) with trained counselors who are able to address workplace stress and violence issues. As a confidential service to employees, the EAP provider will assess whether a situation needs to be brought to management and can intervene in employee conflicts.

Identifying Dangerous Individuals

There are countless triggers of violence between co-workers, and no one set of characteristics necessarily characterizes a perpetrator. However, those who might commit violent acts often exhibit a pattern of behavioral characteristics that indicate their propensity to violence. These characteristics act as red flags that can be detected before a violent incident occurs. Be alert and

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train employees to be alert for these indicators of potential workplace violence, stressing the importance of reporting all suspicious behavior:

- Intimidating, harassing, bullying, belligerent or other inappropriate and aggressive behavior
- Conflicts with customers, co-workers or supervisors
- Making idle threats or references to weapons
- Statements indicating approval of violence or identification with perpetrators of workplace homicides
- Desperate or suicidal statements
- Substance abuse
- Extreme change in normal behavior

Additional Resources

For assistance in mitigating workplace risks, including a workplace violence prevention policy, contact us today at (918) 584-1433.