Keeping the workplace safe
Tips on how to prevent, respond to and recover from workplace violence

Workplace violence affects more than 2 million American workers annually and is currently the fourth leading cause of fatal occupational injuries in the U.S.

“Workplace violence has become a growing concern for employers and employees across the country,” says Cassy Taylor, senior risk services analyst at CompManagement. “Employers face not only the physical and emotional suffering of their employees, but also bear potential costs related to workers’ compensation losses, temporary staffing, overtime, higher turnover, and hidden costs such as lack of productivity and lower morale.”

Smart Business spoke with Taylor about how employers can prevent, respond to and recover from workplace violence incidents.

What is workplace violence and who is the most vulnerable?
Workplace violence is any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.

Those at an increased risk include those who exchange money with the public, deliver goods and services, work alone or in small groups, work late at night or early morning, work in high crime areas or have extensive contact with the public. Other vulnerable occupations include home health care and social work, hospital staff, probation officers and community workers, such as utility workers, phone/cable installers, mail carriers, retail workers and taxi drivers.

What types of workplace violence exist?
There are four types of workplace violence:

- Criminal intent — violent acts by criminals who have no connection with the workplace.
- Customer/client/partner — violence against employees providing services to the public.
- Co-worker — current or former employees.
- Personal relations — a family member or someone with a personal relationship who does not work at the facility.

What are the key elements of a workplace violence protection plan?
The primary elements of a program include planning, policies, training, physical security and evaluation.

Consider establishing a threat assessment team that will assess current conditions, establish and implement policies, develop an employee assistance and training program, conduct practice drills, survey employees to help identify how they feel about their safety while at work, prepare a crisis response plan, and regularly test and improve the program.

How can employers protect employees?
The best step to take is to implement a zero tolerance policy toward workplace violence and create a prevention program. Ensure that all employees know your policy and that all incidents of violence will be investigated.

To protect employees:
- Provide a safety education program so employees know what conduct is not acceptable.
- Secure the workplace: video surveillance, extra lighting, alarm systems, minimize access by outsiders through use of identification badges/electronic keys, train employees on situational awareness, and incorporate scenarios of potential violence for your workplace in emergency drills.
- Instruct employees not to go where they feel unsafe, introduce a buddy system, or provide an escort or police assistance in potentially dangerous situations.

What should be done after an incident of workplace violence?
Always ensure that the appropriate medical evaluation and treatment occurs first, and that the incident is reported to the police. Also be sure to:

- Require that employees report and log all incidents and threats of workplace violence.
- Discuss the circumstances of the incident with staff.
- Encourage employees to share information about ways to avoid similar situations in the future.
- Offer stress debriefing sessions and post-traumatic counseling services to help workers recover from a violent incident.
- Investigate all violent incidents and threats, monitor incidents by type of circumstances and institute corrective action.

CASSY TAYLOR
Senior Risk Services Analyst
CompManagement

(800) 825-6755, ext. 65434
Cassy.Taylor@sedgwick.com

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