

PROTECTING COMMUNITY WORKERS AGAINST VIOLENCE

For many occupations, workplace violence represents a serious occupational risk. Acts such as physical assault or the threat of physical assault are considered workplace violence. Homicide is the second leading cause of all job-related deaths and the leading cause of such deaths for women, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1994). For each murder, there are countless other incidents of workplace violence in which victims are threatened or injured. The financial costs of assault from injuries, lost work time, and restricted duty are tremendous.

Community workers, such as visiting nurses, home health aides, social service workers, child service workers, psychiatric evaluators, probation officers, gas and water utility workers, phone and cable TV installers, and letter carriers, are at risk for workplace violence because they:

Work alone or in small groups, may have to work late night or early morning hours, often work in high-crime areas or work in community settings and homes which, by definition, involve extensive contact with the public.

OSHA's Involvement

The Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Act's General Duty Clause requires employers to provide a safe and healthful working environment for all workers covered by the OSH Act of 1970. Failure to implement the suggestions mentioned in this document is not in itself a violation of the General Duty Clause. If there is a recognized violence hazard in the workplace and employers do not take feasible steps to prevent or abate it, employers can be cited.

Employer Actions to Prevent Violence

Employee safety and health should receive the same priority as client or patient safety. Since workers may be reluctant to report assaults, employers should promote awareness of the dangers of workplace violence, and clearly articulate goals and plans for preventing it.

Essential elements in developing a safety and health program include: **management commitment, employee involvement, job hazard analysis, hazard prevention and control, and training and education.**

Specifically employers should:

- Provide safety education for employees. Local police departments can give training on awareness, avoidance and prevention of mugging, robbery, rape, and other assaults.
- Establish a communication system, such as a cellular phone, for employees to use while in the field.
- Instruct employees not to enter any location where they feel unsafe. Utilize a “buddy system,” escort service, or police assistance in potentially dangerous situations or at night.
- Establish procedures to decrease the risk of robbery (e.g. , advise employees not to carry purses).
- Require field staff to prepare a daily work plan and keep a contact person informed of their location throughout the day.
- Assure proper maintenance of employer provided vehicles.
- Provide field personnel with hand held alarms or noise devices.

Employee Steps to Avoid Violence

- Learn how to recognize, avoid, or diffuse potentially violent situations by attending personal safety training programs.
- Follow procedures for alerting supervisors to any concerns about safety or security.
- Collect detailed information regarding the client’s or patient’s home situation (e.g., exact location, parking facilities).
- Report all violent incidents in writing to the supervisor, even if there were no injuries.

Employer Follow-Up When Violence Occurs

- Encourage employees to report and log all incidents and threats of workplace violence.
- Provide for prompt medical evaluation and treatment after each incident, regardless of severity.
- Promptly report violent incidents to the local police department.
- Inform victims of workplace violence of their legal right to prosecute perpetrators.
- Discuss the circumstances of incidents of assaults with staff members. Provide opportunities for employees to share information about ways to avoid such problems in the future.

- Investigate all violent incidents and threats, monitor trends in violent incidents by type of circumstance, and institute corrective actions.

Other Important Information

Workers who have been assaulted or seen co-workers attacked have reported experiencing short and long term psychological trauma, fear of returning to work, and changes in relationships with co-workers and family. Critical incident stress debriefing sessions and post-trauma counseling services can help workers recover from a violent incident. These services should be part of any violence prevention program.

Government Resources

Occupational Safety and Health Administration – guidelines on workplace violence prevention in health care workers, telephone 202-219-4667.

Cal/OSHA – general guidelines for workplace security and specific guidelines for health care and community service workers, telephone 415-703-4341.

National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) – information on preventing workplace homicides, telephone 1-800-356-4674.