

Keeping a Safe Workplace

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Workplace violence is an important safety and health issue. Its most extreme form, homicide, is the second leading cause of fatal occupational injury in the United States. Nearly 1,000 workers are murdered, and 1.5 million are assaulted in the workplace each year. Robbery is a primary motive of job-related homicide, accounting for 85% of the deaths reported in 1997. **Disputes among coworkers and with customers and clients accounted for about one-tenth of the total!**

RISK FACTORS * which may increase a worker's risk for workplace assault are:

- contact with the public
- exchange of money
- delivery of passengers, goods, or services
- having a mobile workplace such as a taxicab or police cruiser
- working with unstable or volatile persons in health care, social services, or criminal justice settings
- working alone or in small numbers
- working late at night or during early morning hours
- working in high-crime areas
- guarding valuable property or possessions
- working in community-based settings

[*identified by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health]

The causes of employee-related workplace violence can be seen as economic, societal, psychological, and/or organizational. Economic factors include downsizing or "rightsizing," layoffs, growth of technology, recession, and mergers. Societal influences might include rapid change, violence on television and in movies, violence as an accepted means of problem-solving, and the accessibility of handguns. On a psychological level, employees whose judgment is impaired by substance abuse or mental illness, who are experiencing financial or legal problems, or whose family relations are strained may have difficulty separating their personal and

occupational lives. The manager or supervisor might be cast into a parental role and the co-workers may resemble siblings.

The organization can contribute to the incidence of violence if there is an authoritarian or autocratic management, polarization between employees and managers, lack of a forum to address grievances, discouragement of new ideas, or refusing employees a voice in the decision-making process.

Many of the perpetrators are disgruntled employees who were terminated or laid off. **Some of the similarities among employees who committed acts of violence at work include:**

- 1) a history of violence, fascination with the military, or being a survivalist;
- 2) white males;
- 3) over the age of 35 years;
- 4) a loner or an extremist
- 5) carries a grudge;
- 6) has difficulty accepting authority or reality;
- 7) a history of violence toward women; and
- 8) may have substance abuse and/or mental-health problems.

If an employee displays a dramatic behavior or personality change and suddenly becomes hostile, it is vital for the supervisors and coworkers to find out why the change has occurred. Normal behavior is very person-specific. Normal for some may be to smile, laugh, and joke. For others it may be grouchy, shy, or withdrawn. Normal is behavior that is consistent for that person. A significant deviation from normal patterns of behavior might be a distress or warning sign. A recommendation to seek help at REAP might be made at this juncture. Employees who are chronically disgruntled, blame others for their problems, and perceive unfairness or injustice may become violent. If an employee makes intimidating comments, threats, or allusions to violence against others in the company, an investigation should be conducted and referrals made to REAP as soon as possible.

A safe workplace is everyone's responsibility. Be aware of those around you. Be willing to listen and to understand, and treat others with respect. Work toward defusing a problem before it becomes a catastrophe.

We encourage all employers to take advantage of REAP's preventive seminars for employees and supervisors on such topics as dealing with difficult people, managing anger, win-win communication, conflict resolution, substance abuse awareness, and how to make EAP referrals.