



Workplace Violence: Are You Prepared?

Overall, workplace violence, including assaults and suicides, made up about 16% of occupational injuries in 2008. Attendance, morale, and productivity can all be affected when something out of the ordinary, such as a violent act, occurs.

Ninety percent of fatal work injuries occur within private businesses, yet studies indicate most employers are ill-equipped to handle these situations. In fact, according to a recent survey, more than 70 percent of workplaces had no formal program or policy to address this issue.

Liability exists for employers if a violent act occurs, and this liability is compounded if the employer has not taken action proactively to minimize the risks, safeguard the workplace, and protect employees. Therefore, if not already in place, employers would be prudent to establish and implement a policy and a program to effectively manage workplace violence.

Step #1: Have a Written Policy

Violence prevention begins with a well-written policy. Policy language should include a comprehensive list of the types of prohibited behavior, including making threatening remarks, causing physical injury, and subjecting others to reasonable fear of injury or emotional distress.

In addition, a zero-tolerance standard should be established. A true zero-tolerance policy clearly outlines that an employee could be subjected to immediate termination for any substantive violent act or threat. (Contact our office for a complimentary sample policy.)

By itself, a written policy may not prevent violence but it does provide the basis by which the employer will take action in order to protect all employees. In most cases, early detection is essential to overall prevention.

Step #2: Detect it Early

Early detection of a potentially violent person is a critical component to violence prevention programs. Research has shown there are almost always warning signs; and if employers can recognize the signs and take proper action, many problems might be avoided.

Characteristics of a potentially violent person include such things as being a loner, high level/constant stress, temper/anger, holding grudges, a history of aggression, an inability to handle criticism, blaming others, chronic complaints about being persecuted, joking or making offensive comments about violent acts, or a fascination with weapons or violent events.

Early warning signs represented in the workplace may be verbal threats, aggressive outbursts, verbal abuse of co-workers or patients, harassment via telephone calls or e-mail, frequent conflict with others, use of intimidating language or behavior, or getting extremely upset over minor injustices.

While there is no sure way to determine if an employee is

dangerous, intervening when inappropriate behavior occurs will go a long way in preventing potentially violent situations from escalating.

Step #3: Respond to Threats

Comments that sound like a deliberate attempt to disrupt a person's safety or health should be taken seriously. This is especially true when the comment is directed at a specific person and strongly implies hurting others. For example, "I know where you live and will make you regret this."

The immediate course of action for serious threats could be to send the employee home for the remainder of the day. Consider not docking an employee's pay when this is the case. Hurting the employee's income by docking wages may further exacerbate the problem. Removing the alleged threatening employee from the workplace does two things. It allows the employee opportunity to cool off and it provides time for the employer to conduct a more thorough and effective investigation to uncover what happened and why, in order to ascertain the most appropriate action to take.

Removing an employee from the workplace may not be enough. If an employee appears to pose an immediate threat to him or her self or to someone else, then calling 911 immediately will likely be the best course of action.

It is important to note not all threats are a real sign of a potentially dangerous person because violent colloquialisms are inherent in our speech. For example, someone could say, "I'd like to kill them for scheduling a meeting at 6 o'clock at night." The term "kill them" is meant to highlight how upset the speaker is over a particular situation. One assumes there isn't intent to actually harm others. However, this does not mean an employer can ignore the comment as though it is acceptable. Talking to the employee and communicating the inappropriateness of that reaction is reasonable.

Step #4: Eliminate Risk with Former Employees

Many of the violent acts that occur at workplaces are the result of a former employee who was involuntarily terminated. These people are so upset over the perceived injustice they seek revenge on anyone who still works at the practice. While there is no guaranteed method of eliminating all risk of this situation occurring, the following guidelines could assist in the prevention:

- Conduct the termination meeting in a neutral location.
- Terminate early in the week to avoid giving the employee time to "stew" and plot revenge over the weekend. Use of an outplacement service could begin immediately as well.
- Explain the decision briefly and without malice or ill will. Answer questions the employee may have about benefits, pay, etc.
- Consider offering outplacement services in order to focus the employee's attention towards the future and discourage brooding over the past.

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Physical security of the practice is crucial. Employers need to be concerned about keeping all potentially harmful individuals out of the practice. This could be former employees, but it could also be a person involved with an employee who has experienced some injustice and seeks revenge on his/her behalf. Employers are encouraged to complete an assessment of their practice to identify how physical security could be compromised and seek methods to solve any potential hazards.

Step #5: Use Employee Assistance Programs

Employee assistance programs (EAP's) provide counseling and other help to employees having emotional, physical, or other personal problems. Employers can contract with a counseling agency that will provide services to current or ex-employees. This service can be entirely paid for by the employer or a pre-determined limit can also be established.

Use of this service can be voluntary by the employee or with a direct referral from the employer. The issues to be dealt with can vary, but the most common are depression and anxiety, marital and relationship problems, legal difficulties, family concerns, and substance abuse. No matter the issue, an effective EAP will treat the information confidentially and only share usage of the program and not the details on individuals seeking treatment.

The employee's ability to tap into an EAP service or a direct referral to an EAP as a result of an employee's violent act or threat could help eradicate a problem. With direct referral, the employer would have the ability to obtain more information regarding the employee's issue that would enable the employer to reach a decision about moving forward in the employment relationship.

Step #6: Provide Training

One of the first steps to any training program is for employers, managers, and/or supervisors to know how to recognize the signs of a potentially violent employee. A critical component is knowing your employees. An observable change in personality can often be a warning sign that shouldn't be ignored. To notice a change, one must have some kind of baseline to go by.

Other training items to address for dealing with potentially violent employees include:

- Knowing what to do when a violent act or threat occurs.
- Noticing verbal and non-verbal reactions by individuals that may be indicative of anger or hostility.
- Listening to employees who have angry or hostile reactions. Paying attention to words, actions, and unspoken messages.
- Asking questions to allow a person to vent.
- Controlling your own response to remain calm and non-threatening. Acknowledging concerns and understanding about how the person feels.

- Getting assistance from others, when needed, especially from someone not directly affected by the situation.
- Explaining the need to have time to respond to the issue and set up a separate meeting to follow up.

Conclusion

All dentists have a general obligation to provide a work environment that is safe for employees. While there are no guarantees that violent acts or threats will never occur, there are many proactive steps the employer can and should take in an effort to protect the practice. Bottom line: Dentists who improve their recruiting skills, create an environment of respect and dignity, and make a strong effort to treat everyone fairly can do a lot to minimize violence in the workplace.



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