

Violence in the workplace can occur in various forms, whether that be verbal or physical. Knowing how to prevent workplace violence is essential to the health of your business and knowing how to properly react to an incident is just as important.

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), workplace violence is defined as any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.

Workplace violence can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide, making it one of the leading causes of job-related deaths. OSHA said that [nearly 2 million American workers are the victims](#) of workplace violence each year. This number can be reduced by implementing proper workplace violence procedures and training.

"Employers should make safety and prevention a priority by encouraging employees to take responsibility for their own actions and outcomes, creating an environment where employees feel comfortable reporting a problem, and showing employees that when they report a problem, it is promptly addressed," said Julie Croushore, vice president of risk management at [Engage PEO](#).

Violence in the workplace is not limited to a company's current or former employees; for example, it may be perpetrated by a customer, family member or even a stranger. Because of this, it is important that employees are aware of the best practices for dealing with workplace violence in each scenario.

You can prepare for potential workplace violence by identifying high-risk industries and employees, creating a workplace violence plan and training your employees on the guidelines.

Identify high-risk industries and employees.

The first step in prevention is to identify what leads to workplace violence and what industries are most susceptible. Although no company or employee is completely immune to the risk of violence, Suzanne Singer, partner at [Rumberger, Kirk & Caldwell](#), said there are some factors that leave certain employers and industries at a greater risk.

"Among those [at a higher risk] are employees who exchange money with the public, and those who work alone or in small groups, during late night or early morning hours, or in community settings or homes where they have extensive contact with the public," said Singer. "This group includes social service workers, individuals in the healthcare field, community workers, probation officers and psychological/psychiatric evaluators."

You can also identify high-risk employees through warning signs. Croushore said these signs can include disgruntled employees, problems or violence at home, substance abuse, isolation and emotional distress.

"Employers should also encourage all employees to report to their manager or supervisor if they have any concerns about themselves, a co-worker or have knowledge of issues a co-worker may have at home," said Croushore.

These risk factors should be considered with current employees, as well as future ones. When hiring new employees, verify their information by checking references. You may also consider conditioning your offers of employment upon the completion of background checks or drug tests.

Create a workplace violence plan.

Every business should create a plan for how to prepare for and react to violence in the workplace. Federal and state laws are vague on what employers are responsible for providing, still, organizations would be wise to have the proper safety systems in place for the well-being of their staff.

Gargi Rajan, head of human resources at [Mercer-Mettl](#), said nothing should be left to the benefit of the doubt or interpretational differences when dealing with workplace assault and violence.

"There have to be strict and documented manuals, standard operating procedures (SOPs) or workplace safety programs for everyone included as part of the orientation, training, and HR processes," said Rajan.

When deciding what should be included in your workplace violence prevention program, focus on establishing a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence and creating a protocol for employees to safely report behavior.

Croushore said your workplace violence program should outline the following:

1. How to assess a potentially violent situation
2. How to report incidents of workplace violence
3. How to get help, warn other employees and secure the workplace, when needed
4. When and how to involve the police and gather information to assist an investigation
5. How you will initiate follow-up activities like debriefing employees and resuming operations

Employers should also be prepared to offer counseling support services to employees who have been affected by workplace violence, including services through employee assistance programs (EAPs). Croushore said employee safety and risk consultants can assist companies in promoting and maintaining safer work environments.

Train your employees on the workplace violence prevention guidelines.

Once your office has decided on set guidelines for how to handle violence in the workplace, you must train your staff on how to follow each step. Provide continual safety training throughout the year to keep employees up to date on appropriate behavior. If any of your employees have a history of violent behavior, he or she should receive extra attention as to which behavior will and will not be tolerated in the workplace.

Since violence can vary in degrees, so will your reaction procedures. You should conduct safety drills to prepare employees for various acts of violence. This is especially important for extremely violent scenarios like workplace shootings.

"Employees' responses should be automatic, because they have been trained and have practiced what to do," said Croushore. "Employers should also utilize the ALICE method for training:

alert, lockdown, inform, counter and evacuate."

Proper planning and training can drastically affect the outcome of a violent workplace occurrence.

React to workplace violence by remaining calm and leading your team

Even with the best preparation and training strategies in place, workplace violence can occur. How you react as an employer is extremely important for the safety of your staff. Take all workplace harassment complaints and potentially violent issues seriously and always address them in the appropriate manner. [See Related Story: [Workplace Harassment: How to Recognize and Report It](#)]

When addressing employee complaints, Rajan said to remain neutral to avoid escalation and unfair bias.

"[Employers] should always have a fair redressal committee set up to address such issues; involve a legal party wherever necessary and offer resolutions to the parties involved," said Rajan. "You should never appear to be partial or biased in your judgments."

If workplace violence does occur, employers should remain calm, take control and set an example for their employees. Don't escalate a situation by arguing with the assailant, and don't try to be a hero. Always involve law enforcement when necessary.

"An employer should be prepared to act with care and compassion with the immediate first response to get employees and their families the treatment that they need," said Croushore. "Care should also be provided to non-injured employees, and employers should consider providing counseling or their resources from their EAP provider."

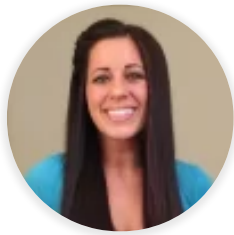
Conduct an investigation as to how the violence occurred and assess what could have been done differently to improve your organization's violence safety program. Singer said employers should encourage their staff to share their input in the matter as well.

Follow a simple checklist to ensure a violence-free work environment.

Although workplace violence training and education is often not legally required, it is good business practice for employers to implement appropriate policies and procedures for protecting employees against workplace violence.

Singer made a simple checklist for employers to follow when creating a violence-free work environment:

- Create a zero-tolerance policy for workplace violence.
 - Establish a process where employees can safely and anonymously report threatening activity, no matter where it comes from.
 - Implement the "see something, say something" policy.
 - Install security entrances and video surveillance.
 - Establish safe places for employees to take refuge during violent events.
 - Consider identification badges and electronic key access to the workplace.
 - Potentially hire security guards, if the business is located in a high crime area.
 - Develop the right security plan and consult with security experts.
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