

OP-ED: Protect employees against possible workplace violence

By: Kyle Abraham in Compliance Corner October 22, 2014 2:16 pm



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Workplace violence is a sad reality of our world today. Last year, there were 397 workplace homicides in the United States. Just last month, a former employee walked into a UPS facility in Alabama and shot and killed two people, and in Oklahoma someone recently terminated by Vaughan Foods returned to his former workplace and attacked and killed a former co-worker.

Unfortunately, the question is not if more incidents of workplace violence will occur, but rather where they will occur. If one were to occur at your workplace, would you be prepared? For too many of us, the answer is "no." If you find yourself in a violent incident at work, your survival may depend on whether you and your employer have a plan.

While employers may not possess the power to fix the social forces that contribute to workplace violence, they can control the effect of workplace violence on their employees. In fact, employers have some legal responsibility to do so. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recently cited several employers for failing to provide employees with adequate safeguards against violent acts that occur in the workplace. In August, OSHA announced that it fined a company \$71,000 for failing to adequately protect employees against workplace violence.

To protect employees, employers should take the following steps: research previous incidents, conduct a site visit, develop a written plan, train employees on the plan, test the plan and revise as needed. Research should not be limited to an employer's own facility, but include others with similar operations. For example, employers with a perimeter gate and access badges can learn valuable lessons about removing former employees' access to the facility by studying the September 2013 incident at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C.

By conducting a site visit, an employer can assess both the specific types of threats likely to occur and whether current facilities provide adequate protection and resources in the event of an incident. A site visit may reveal the need for some simple changes that could mean the difference between life and death, such as installation of a lock on an office door to provide an effective hiding place from an intruder. An office remodel presents a great opportunity to redesign the workspace to prevent entrapment of employees or to build in controlled access to employee work areas.

Employers need to develop a written plan. The plan should instruct employees how to prevent or defuse an incident of violence. Employers are wise to train employees on how to identify escalating behavior in co-workers, patients or customers. When employees spot the warning signs of escalating behavior, such as confusion, frustration, blame, anger, and finally hostility, they should contact their supervisor.

Supervisors should be trained on the appropriate strategic response to the escalating behavior. Employers should also develop procedures for employees to discreetly alert supervisors and co-workers of an escalating situation and the need for assistance. For example, it is common practice in hospitals to alert staff to emergencies by using a public address system; "code silver" typically indicates a combative person with a weapon. Such a warning provides employees the opportunity to take steps to protect themselves.

If it is not possible to prevent an incident of workplace violence, employees should be trained on how to respond appropriately. There are three things employees can do that make a difference: run, hide or fight.

First, if employees can get safely out of harm's way, they should do so. Employees should help others leave too, but not at the risk of slowing down their own exit. If employees do not have a safe escape path, they should find a place to hide. Employees should turn out lights, lock doors and silence cellphones. Only as a last resort should employees try to engage an intruder.

It is important for employees to know that first responders' top priority is not to evaluate individuals or attend to the injured, but rather to stop the intruder. Employees need to remain calm and hidden until authorities communicate that the scene is safe. These steps can make a difference in employees' survival.

It is not enough to have a great plan; employers must also ensure that everyone experiences how it will work. It is a best practice for employers to conduct workplace violence drills. Such drills require careful planning to ensure

employees and visitors understand the incident is simulated. Placing a camera, such as a GoPro, on a simulated intruder provides great data to analyze how employees responded and how to improve their response. This data will aid employers with the final step: revising the plan as needed.

It is often said that nobody plans to fail; they just fail to plan. The consequences of employers failing to plan for an incident of workplace violence could have dire consequences. Employers may want to avoid planning for a situation that seems altogether too terrible to consider; however, preparing employees for safety will demonstrate care for their well-being. Employers can prepare employees for an incident of workplace violence by training and equipping them on how to properly manage the crisis.

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