

11 guidelines for preventing and addressing workplace violence

Nearly 2 million U.S. workers are victims of workplace violence each year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Last year, 506 employees were slain at work. Homicide is the leading cause of death for women in the workplace. Don't let your organization add to those sobering statistics.

To reduce the chance of workplace violence—or your liability if it does happen—follow these 11 guidelines:

- 1. Ban weapons,** and have a zero-tolerance policy regarding threats in the workplace.
- 2. Screen applicants carefully** by checking references and doing criminal background checks.
- 3. Train supervisors** to recognize personality changes in employees that could be warning signs of potential violence.
- 4. Defuse disputes.** Establish a mediation program to resolve employee disputes rather than letting them simmer.
- 5. Regularly evaluate security systems.** Do you need silent alarms, ID keys, cameras or even an armed guard?
- 6. Require employees to report restraining orders** that apply to them to management. Make it a policy in your employee handbook.
- 7. Train front-line employees** such as receptionists to be on the lookout for unusual or unsettling encounters. Provide clear instructions on how to handle them. Train all employees on when and how to contact police.
- 8. Establish procedures** for employees to report threats or other violent behavior. Offer several avenues for reporting: supervisors, security personnel, HR or, if there's imminent danger, everyone nearby.
- 9. Have a plan for handling contacts** between employees and law enforcement. If a police officer or process server needs to see an employee, instruct your receptionist to direct the official to a private part of the office near an outside door. Then quietly ask the employee involved to report to that area.
- 10. Document any threats** and your response to them. Your zero-tolerance policy should dictate terminating any employee who makes a threat. If it's a worker's relative or friend who's being disruptive and dangerous, you are within your legal rights to terminate the employee, provided you give adequate warning.
- 11. Terminate with care.** Have someone present as a witness if you have to terminate a violent employee; consider engaging backup security.

Have a plan: What to do if violence occurs

You should have a plan for what to do in case violence does erupt, starting with protecting yourself and others, calling police and warning those in the vicinity. The plan should include the following steps after the assailant leaves:

- Seek assistance from co-workers and attend to those who are injured.
- If the assailant is an employee, pull his personnel file.
- Designate someone to notify the victims' families. Be sure all employees have a current emergency contact on file. Update that information annually.
- Inform a designated media spokesperson.
- Notify your attorney.
- Provide counselors trained to handle post-traumatic stress. Have them to talk with all employees affected by the incident.
- Ask law enforcement for approval to clean up the site. You don't want to damage the integrity of the evidence, but you do want to restore the site as soon as possible.
- Beware of looters, who might try to take advantage of your situation.
- Begin documentation of the event as soon as possible.