



# Minnesota Counties Insurance Trust Resource Briefing

September 1995

## Workplace Violence

### BACKGROUND:

Violence is words and actions that hurt people. Violence is the abusive or unjust exercise of power, intimidation, harassment and/or the threatened or actual use of force which results in or has a high likelihood of causing hurt, fear, injury, suffering or death. Violence can be perpetrated by or against individuals or groups.

We are experiencing a trend of increased violence in our society. This trend has found its way into the workplace. In 1992, there were 11,000 incidents of workplace violence, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. In a one year study conducted between July 1992 and July 1993, more than 2 million people in the U.S. were physically attacked at work. In the same study, 6 million workers were threatened and 16 million workers were harassed. Many of the incidences went unreported. Fifty-eight percent of harassment victims, 43 percent of those threatened, and 24 percent of those attacked did not inform their employers.

A U.S. Department of Labor study found that women are more likely to be harassed, and men are more likely to be attacked. Harassers are typically coworkers or supervisors, while attackers are more often constituents/clients or strangers. The survey found that harassment, which includes bullying, profanity, and sexual and racist comments, is as physically damaging and more psychologically damaging than physical attacks. Symptoms include: depression, insomnia, headaches, and ulcers.

Respondents identified poverty, substance abuse, layoffs, and firings as the chief causes of violence. Attack victims most commonly attributed the conduct to irrational behavior resulting from a mental disturbance or the influence of alcohol or drugs. The second most common reason was constituent/client dissatisfaction. Harassment victims said the conduct was likely to be related to interpersonal conflict.

Workplace violence takes a huge economic toll and has significant employer liability implications. It is estimated that violence costs \$4.2 billion annually and 1.8 million workdays are lost each year. The violence affects more than just the victim. According to survey data, 21 % of workers said their work was disrupted because of fears of harassment or violence.

The offensive and violent conduct costs employers in productivity, higher health and disability coverage, legal liability, turnover, and increased absences. Increasingly, the legal system is holding employers responsible for their workers' safety and conduct.

Counties need to develop workplace violence risk management and loss control services to prevent serious problems by dealing with them when they are first brought to the supervisor's attention. This publication is designed to assist counties in accomplishing this purpose.

## RISK FACTORS

### The Environment

Increased violence in our society has raised the employee's risk of encountering violence in the workplace. Regardless of the social and economic reasons for increasing hostility and violence, it is incumbent that employers recognize the dangers to which staff are exposed while performing job duties.

Studies have indicated that some of the jobs most at risk for encountering hostility and violent behavior are: receptionists, human resources/personnel managers, other managers and supervisors, social service workers, and health care professionals such as nurses and home health aides. Other positions at risk within the county setting include: appraisers, probation officers, and building inspectors.

### Work Practices

Many studies have suggested staffing patterns can contribute to violence. More frequent and increased interaction with patients or clients are known factors which increase an employee's vulnerability. Work in high crime areas or working alone without systems for emergency assistance may increase the risk of assaults. In addition, typical work activities may arouse anger or fear in some clients and result in acts of violence. Long waits or the inability to obtain needed services are seen as contributing factors to the problem of violence.

### Perpetrator and Victim Profile

It is difficult to predict when or which employee/client will exhibit violent behavior. Conditions that enhance the probability of violence are: drug abuse/alcoholism, family distress, marital problems, and personal or emotional problems.

A history of violent behavior is one of the best indicators of future violence by an individual. Generally speaking, this information is not available, especially for new clients or employees. Even if it is available, workers not directly involved with the individual employee or client would not have knowledge or access to it. Often violence is not aimed at the actual care giver, but is the perpetrator's way of responding to other stimuli in life.

## PREVENTION

### Anti-Violence Policies

Counties should develop and implement policies against offensive conduct, harassment and violence. These policies should:

- Establish a general policy to maintain an environment free from offensive conduct, harassment, and violence based on protected class status.
- Define offensive conduct, harassment and violence.
- Establish formal reporting procedures for individuals who believe they are victims of offensive conduct, harassment or violence.
- Establish procedures to conduct investigations upon receipt of a complaint.
- Define what types of action the county will take as a result of investigations.
- Establish procedures to take action against employees who retaliate against other employees for reporting of offensive conduct, harassment or violence.
- Provide for appropriate disciplinary actions consistent with applicable collective bargaining agreements, other county policies and state and federal law.

## Training

Once an anti-violence policy is developed, it is most important that it be disseminated and that all employees receive training regarding the policy. New or untrained staff are at the highest risk for injury. The best opportunity to defuse a potential crisis situation is at the beginning when an individual shows signs of anxiety. Learning and practicing methods of defusing hostility and self protection are critical. Personal protective items and communication devices may be appropriate, depending upon job conditions.

County management staff should receive special training in the handling of complaints. Management staff should also be trained to recognize employee stress and to understand the profile of “high risk” individuals. The identification of early warning signs can help avoid escalation of an incident. Human resources staff should be trained to effectively manage hiring, downsizing, and firing recognizing that these actions can be emotionally charged and have the potential to lead to violence.

## Managing Hostility

MCIT has workplace violence training tapes, produced by the National Crisis Prevention Institute, entitled: “Street Smart from 9 to 5”, available on loan to members. The videos contain extensive information beyond what can be covered here. The tapes explain that in most cases, people do not explode or become hostile without some kind of buildup. This process is called crisis development. The process of crisis development has the following levels and can be dealt with in specific ways to reduce anxiety:

- Anxious behavior—fidgeting, pacing, and wringing the hands. A supportive response which acknowledges the person's concern and offers help is often enough to calm the individual.
- Defensive behavior—irrational, belligerent, passive acceptance, loss of rationale. Suggested responses to these signs are: give direction clearly and objectively. Explain why behavior is unacceptable.
- Physically violent behavior. This type of behavior is not common but can happen. The suggested response is to activate the organization's violence response procedures.

## Nonverbal Behavior

When people become angry, they become irrational. An irrational person responds little to spoken words. Instead, an irrational person focuses on other messages—such as those you are sending through your use of personal space and body language.

Most people need about 2 1/2 to 3 feet of personal space around them to feel comfortable. Any closer may increase anxiety and cause the situation to escalate.

Another consideration when approaching a person who may be anxious or defensive is body language. How you position your body sends a message. For example, standing face-to-face and shoulder-to-shoulder is usually perceived as a challenging position. Gestures such as hands on hips, finger pointing, and arms folded over the chest also can send negative nonverbal messages that are likely to increase hostility in the person with whom you are interacting. A non-threatening position that is very effective is standing outside the other individual's personal space and off to the side—making your body language non-threatening.

## Paraverbal Communication

Paraverbal communication, or “how you say, what you say”, can help defuse tension and anxiety. Tone of voice, volume, and rate of speech can convey the message you are impatient, condescending, or irritated. Paraverbal communication may determine whether a person becomes hostile or calms down.

## Personal Prevention Strategies

The best way to deal with workplace violence is to take steps ahead of time that will minimize the chance of it happening. Several personal prevention strategies that should be practiced are:

- Use the buddy system anytime you are in a situation where there is even a remote threat of danger.
- Position yourself for safety. Never turn your back on someone who is angry or agitated. Position your desk near the door, preferably with the door at your side.
- Take a mental inventory of potential weapons. Everyday items like pens, staplers, or tape dispensers can be used as weapons, as can your own clothing and jewelry, including scarves, neckties, and earrings.
- Practice strategic visualization. Mentally rehearse the way you would respond to a violent incident. Visualize the person, the weapon, possible exits and escape routes, and how you might negotiate.
- Trust your instincts. Listen to your internal warning signals.

## Work Site Analysis

Organizations must assess their exposure to violence in the workplace and protect against it. Although some measures may seem expensive or difficult to implement, they may be needed to adequately protect the health and well-being of employees. Work site analysis identifies existing hazards, operations, and situations that create or contribute to hazards. This includes close scrutiny and tracking of injury/illness and incident records to identify patterns that may indicate causes of aggressive behavior and assaults.

### Work site analysis entails:

- Record Review—analyze medical, safety, and insurance records, including the OSHA 200 log and information compiled for incidents of assaultive behavior from clients, employees or visitors. This information should be used to identify incidence and severity, as well as establish a base line for identifying change. Analyze any trends relating to particular departments, units, job titles, and so forth.
- Identification of Security Hazards—identify areas needing in-depth scrutiny of security hazards:
  - Identify work positions in which staff members are at risk of assaultive behavior.
  - Use a checklist for identifying high risk factors such as type of client, physical risk factors of the building, isolated locations/job activities, lighting problems, high risk activities, problem clients, uncontrolled access, and areas of previous security problems.
  - Determine if risk factors have been reduced or eliminated to the extent feasible. Analyze effectiveness of existing programs.
  - Apply analysis to all newly planned and modified facilities, or any public services program to ensure that hazards are reduced or eliminated before involving clients or employees.
  - Conduct periodic surveys at least annually to identify risks and assess the effects of changes. Incorporate information into a plan of correction and ongoing surveillance.

## Hazard Prevention and Control

### Outlined below are methods of reducing hazards:

- General Building, Work Station and Area Designs—Design of facilities should ensure uncrowded conditions for staff and clients. Rooms should be planned for privacy and protection, but should not isolate employees. Client/constituent access to staff rooms should be controlled. Certain doors should be locked. Metal bars or protective decorative grating on outside ground level windows can be installed to prevent unauthorized entry.
- Maintenance—Prompt repair and replacement programs are needed to ensure the safety of staff and clients. Any mechanical device utilized for security and safety must be routinely tested for effectiveness and maintained on a scheduled basis.

## Medical Management

A program which provides medical and emotional treatment for victimized employees should be developed. The consequences to employees of workplace violence may include: death or severe injuries, short and long term psychological trauma, post traumatic stress, anger, anxiety, irritability, depression, shock, disbelief, selfblame, fear of returning to work, disturbed sleep patterns, headaches, and change in relationships with coworkers and family.

Employees also may fear criticism by managers, increase their use of alcohol and medication to cope with stress, suffer from feelings of professional incompetence, experience physical illness, feel lack of power, increase absenteeism, and suffer performance difficulties.

## Record keeping

The following records should be maintained by the employer:

- OSHA 200 log. OSHA regulations require entry on the Injury and Illness Log 200, of any injury which requires more than first aid, is a lost time injury, requires modified duty, or causes loss of consciousness. Assaults should be entered on the log. Doctors reports of work injury and supervisors reports should be kept of each recorded assault.
- Incidents of abuse, verbal attacks, or aggressive behavior which may be threatening to the worker but not result in injury, such as pushing, shouting, or an act of aggression toward other individuals requiring action by staff should be recorded. These might include unprovoked sudden attacks, client altercations, and management of assaultive or verbal behavior actions. This record may be an assaultive incident report or documented in some manner which can be evaluated on a monthly basis.
- A record and communication system should be developed so all staff who may provide help for an escalating or potentially aggressive, abusive, or violent constituent/client will be aware of the status of the person and any problems experienced in the past. (Data practices requirements must be taken into account, however.)

## CONCLUSION

If counties are to provide a safe work environment, it must be evident to administrators, supervisors, employees, and constituents/clients that violence in the workplace will not be tolerated. By taking risk management steps, counties can avoid or minimize losses due to workplace violence. Implementation of these procedures will assist in legal defense, should the county be sued for failing to provide a safe workplace.

Contact MCIT at 612-209-6400, for a sample Offensive Conduct, Harassment, and Violence Policy, as well as training tapes entitled, "Street Smart from 9 to 5", which are available on loan to MCIT members.

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