

## **Workplace Violence Prevention**

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November 6, 1998 marks the 20-year anniversary of the most horrific mass murder in Canadian history. Fourteen young women were brutally gunned down at the University of Montreal. The killer, who later turned the gun on himself, was seeking revenge on innocent women — any women that happened to be in his path on that fateful day. As a resident of Montreal attending McGill University at the time, I witnessed the devastating effects this tragic incident had on the families and friends of the victims and on the community at large. No one could escape the grief, fear, and anger that penetrated the city after the incident.

The daily news brings us tragic stories of violent incidents that take and threaten the lives of ordinary citizens. More and more incidents are occurring in places we once thought of as being safe — our workplaces. Although the Montreal massacre is an extreme example of a random act of violence, most incidents of violence at work are not random acts. Most violent incidents that occur in the workplace can be prevented.

Many working people deal with the threat of violence on a daily basis. Taxi drivers, retail and bank clerks, hospital workers, social services professionals, and hospitality workers are part of industries considered to be at high risk of potential violence.

Violence at work can take many forms — from critical incidents such as armed robbery, to threats made by a client or co-worker to harm an employee. Violent acts at work can stem from strangers, customers, clients, service providers, co-workers, or other people known to the employees.

How do violent acts affect your business? The cost of just one incident causing injury to an employee goes far beyond immediate medical attention, counseling, repairs, and potential liability suits. After a critical incident, businesses often experience high levels of stress, decreased productivity, low morale, increased absenteeism, and higher staff turnover.

High-risk occupations and industries are not the only ones affected by workplace violence.

## Not in My Back Yard

Perhaps in your business you feel that violence does not affect you or your co-workers. You may work in a low risk occupation or feel safe in the surroundings of a secured building where all visitors enter with security access codes. No matter what the industry or occupation, no one is completely immune. Although some professions and industries are at much lower risk than others are, employees from every occupation will have a story to tell.

Some examples of workplace violence in the office...

A client threatened Ben over the telephone and claimed he would seek personal revenge if Ben did not accept his loan application. Ben did not take the threat seriously because his coworkers informed him that they receive similar threats 2-3 times per year.

Claire was on her way to meet a client. While approaching her car in the underground parkade, she surprised a man breaking into a vehicle. The man grabbed her purse and threw her to the ground before running away. Although Claire suffered only minor physical injuries, she missed 2 weeks of work due to post-traumatic stress.

Dave had the unfortunate task of terminating one of his employees. During the process, the employee exploded with anger in Dave's office and attempted to stab Dave with a letter opener he picked up from the desk. Dave managed to restrain the employee and co-workers rushed to Dave's aid.

Brenda was meeting a recently hired manager from another branch at an out-of town convention. Although she did not feel completely at ease with him, she agreed to meet at his hotel after the conference to discuss his new position. Brenda was shocked when the new manager made aggressive sexual advances toward her and then threatened to harm her if she spoke about it. Brenda was too scared and embarrassed to report the incident. She quit her job 2 weeks later.

When I speak to business and Human Resources Managers, they are often not aware that violence is a threat to their staff in any way. Why? Only a fraction of violent incidents are ever reported. The most common reasons employees do not report incidents are: 1) they feel nothing can or will be done about the situation 2) they blame themselves for not being careful enough 3) they feel that reporting incidents may reflect badly on them 4) they are simply too afraid to speak out.

## So What Can You Do?

Most violent incidents can be prevented. Carefully prepared response plans can greatly reduce the effect and severity of unforeseen circumstances. Just as your workplace has emergency evacuation procedures and systems in place to protect valuable goods, data and documents, workplaces should also initiate safety programs to effectively manage potential violent incidents.

The Workers' Compensation Board of B.C. (WCB) recognizes violence as a health and safety hazard and has regulations in place for the protection of workers from violence in the workplace. The WCB describes violence as the attempted or actual exercise of any physical force so as to cause injury to a worker, and includes any threatening statement or behaviour which gives a worker reasonable cause to believe that he or she is at risk of injury. WCB regulations specify the steps that employers must take to eliminate or minimize the risk of violence including:

- conducting a workplace violence risk assessment

- implementing risk control policies and practices
- creating procedures for responding to, reporting and investigating incidents of violence.

## How Do You Begin the Process?

The first step for any business is to recognize the potential for violence and take responsibility by making a commitment to manage workplace violence.

In order to find out if any staff at your organization are at risk, you need to perform a comprehensive violence risk assessment that will uncover all safety vulnerabilities at your workplace.

Every workplace has unique safety issues due to the location, the facility structure, security measures, the type of work performed, the type of services provided, the work flow, the amount of public interaction, the equipment or tools used for the jobs performed, and the characteristics and skill level of the employees.

Employees who work directly with the public, work alone, or with cash or valuables are potentially at high risk of violence in their jobs.

It is also important to consider areas employees travel to in their day to day work routine, inside and outside of the facility. Acts of violence commonly occur offsite and in parking areas and grounds surrounding a work facility.

Once areas of risk are known, the threat of violence in your workplace can be managed.

The most important component of the risk assessment is employee feedback. To accurately determine safety vulnerabilities, all employees must be involved in the process. Ask your staff about past incidents and safety concerns they have and whether or not your current work practices effectively manage these concerns. In many cases, the potential for violence occurs as a result of specific tasks employees perform or because of the way a task is conducted. There are often very simple measures that can be taken to eliminate or at least minimize the risk of violence in such cases.

Implementing effective preventive measures and response plans will greatly increase the safety of valued staff and customers as well as protect business owners from liability.

## What You Should Know

Violence is a growing problem in our communities and the workplace is not immune to this. Violence in the workplace can have devastating consequences on the people affected by an incident as well as on your business.

From 1993 to 1997, there were 6,279 disability claims accepted by the Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia. (WCB) due to acts of violence. These claims resulted in 291,619 working days lost and cost \$35,179,211, not including health care and rehabilitation costs. These statistics do not account for the numerous incidents that occur and are never reported.

Violence can stem from many sources. Incidents occur between employees and strangers but, more often between employees and someone a worker knows including, clients, acquaintances, relatives, service providers, and co-workers.

The only way to deal with this problem is to be proactive. The WCB has health and safety regulations in

place that mandate all B.C. employers to assess and manage the risk of workplace violence.

## What is Risk Assessment?

To determine if and how your staff are at risk of violence, you must be clear on what violence and risk means to you and your employees.

Violence can take many forms from verbal threats to physical assault. The WCB describes violence as the attempted or actual exercise of any physical force so as to cause injury to a worker, and includes any threatening statement or behavior that makes a worker feel he or she is at risk of injury.

Risk (as a noun) means danger or hazard. Risk (as a verb) refers to the probability of an event that causes injury or another type of adverse consequence. The greater the likelihood of an adverse event, the higher the risk; and, the more severe the outcome of an adverse event, the greater the risk.

A violence risk assessment simply determines who, when, how often and under what conditions employees are exposed to potential violence. Rating the risks as high or low will help determine priorities for implementing strategies to manage the risks. For example, the risk of violence may be considered high if it happens frequently (customer service disputes) or if the consequences are potentially severe (armed robbery).

Occupations and job tasks that are considered at highest risk for violence most often include those where employees work directly with the public, sell or serve alcohol, work with cash or valuables, or work alone or in isolated conditions.

Whether your business has a staff of two or one hundred or more, there are steps that you should take to determine safety vulnerabilities in your workplace.

## What You Need to Do:

- 1) **Talk to your staff.** The most important component of the risk assessment is employee feedback. Survey and/or interview staff in your organization to determine if and under what circumstances violence has occurred in the past. Ask employees about safety concerns they have and how they have dealt with incidents or threats of violence. Depending on the business, confidential surveys may be the most effective method for gaining candid information.
- 2) **Review current practices.** Thoroughly review your present safety programs and procedures such as personal security measures, emergency plans, harassment policy, hiring and termination practices, and task specific safety procedures.
- 3) **Perform a site inspection.** Perform a review of all security measures and potential safety vulnerabilities of your office/facility. Results from the staff survey will determine areas that must be given special attention. Inspect methods of access and lighting levels in and around the building and parking areas, organization of the work space, methods of communication, and tools and equipment used at the workplace.
- 4) **Consider other factors.** While performing steps 1-3, consider how the following factors may influence the risk of violence: crime rate of the location, hours of operation, staff complement, and the skills, experience and other attributes of the staff.
- 5) **Document results.** Your assessment should determine who is exposed to potential violence, the

type of interactions or tasks that may lead to violent incidents, the circumstances of such incidents, the characteristics of the aggressor and employee, and the usual or likely outcomes. Where no risk of violence is found, no further action is required.

**6) Evaluate.** Compare your assessment results with those of similar industries, occupations and neighbouring businesses. Research safety and security measures available for the type of risks your employees are exposed to.

**7) Develop Strategies.** With cooperation from your staff or health and safety committee, choose and create strategies that best manage the risks at your organization. Some strategies may include:

- communication methods
- safety procedures (general and task specific)
- staff training
- security measures
- organizational modifications

## Program Development

Every business will have a unique violence prevention plan determined by the needs found in the risk assessment and the safety strategies chosen. In order to meet the minimum requirements of the WCB, certain components must be included in your program.

## What You Need to Have

**1) Policy statement.** Recognition of violence as a workplace hazard and a commitment to minimizing risk.

**2) Procedures.** Safety procedures must be documented that instruct workers on how to prevent, avoid or safely perform work that may involve a risk of violence.

**3) Periodic risk assessments.** After the initial review, a risk assessment must be performed periodically and whenever there is a significant change in the organization. Violence prevention and response measures should be regularly reviewed for effectiveness.

**4) Documenting risks and providing information.** All risks of violence must be documented and any workers at risk must be informed.

**5) Staff training.** Workers must be trained to recognize, respond to, and document any violent incidents.

**6) Reporting & investigating.** Incidents of violence must be reported to the WCB and corrective measures must be put into place as soon as possible.

**7) Response and follow up.** If a violent incident occurs, victims must be advised to see a physician and/or receive critical incident counseling.

## Benefits of Planning Ahead

Most violent incidents can be prevented. For unforeseen situations, carefully prepared response plans can greatly reduce the severity of the consequences. The most obvious benefit of violence prevention planning is a safer and more secure working environment for everyone connected to your business. Safety planning may also lead to increased job satisfaction and employee morale, a boosted company reputation, and, most importantly, it may save someone's life.

*For more information please contact the Provincial or State Workplace Safety Board in your community.*