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Workplace Violence

A Seven-Step Process to Address and Manage Potentially Violent Situations in the Workplace

Covering the full life-cycle of the event from Prevention – Threat Recognition - Mitigation – Response

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Excerpt from the Introduction Chapter to Workplace Violence…

The Challenges

More than 20 million Americans, nearly one in every five in the non-government U.S. labor force, work for firms that have fewer than 20 employees. Firms with payrolls between 20 and 100 employ almost another 20 million U.S. workers. Small businesses account for the vast majority of employers. Among the nation's 5.6 million private employers, almost four-fifths have between one and nine employees.

Why is this of concern to government agencies? A significant number of government contractors come from the small business sector. Government employees visit their facilities, and their work often shares a public image with the government agency that contracts with them. In other words, WPV in any sector of the national workforce can create a potential hazard to the state, local and federal workplace.

While small employers cover the full range of income and occupations, they are also the typical employers of the lowest-paid, lowest-status workers, including immigrants and members of ethnic minorities. (Small Business Administration statistics indicate that annual pay in businesses with fewer than 20 workers is almost 25 percent less than in firms employing 500 or more.) Minority employers represent a large majority in the small-business category.

Employees working in lower-paying jobs for small employers face no less risk of violence on the job than any other group of workers. For many reasons, however, they are almost certainly the least likely to get protection from violence-prevention efforts. Consequently, reaching those employers and employees and finding ways to extend antiviolence programs into their workplaces may be the most challenging task facing any national effort to reduce workplace violence.

The hurdles to violence prevention in small businesses are numerous and high. With very few exceptions, small businesses will not have their own security force, training capability, employee assistance program, medical service, legal advisers, or human resources department. They will ordinarily have less capacity than big companies to screen job applicants and are less likely to have formal policies or procedures for employees to report threats or violence. They are similarly less likely to have an established, continuing relationship with law enforcement or social service agencies.

Small business owners and managers typically lack specialized knowledge or skills in legal and human resources issues related to workplace violence and may not be aware of resources available to help deal with a troubled or potentially violent worker, threats, stalking, or domestic abuse affecting an employee or other violence-related problems.

This may be even truer when the employee, the workforce, or both are from immigrant or minority communities and are separated by culture or language from the majority culture and its institutions.

Employees in small firms, especially low-wage workers, are less likely than other U.S. workers to have medical insurance or sick leave and thus are more vulnerable to the consequences of a violent incident. In many cases, they may also be less aware and less able to pursue their legal rights and thus are more vulnerable to threats and punish-the-victim practices.

To meet the special challenge of extending workplace violence protection to small businesses, the business, law enforcement, occupational safety, and social service communities should consider a variety of possible actions. These could include programs to:

• Design model violence-prevention programs and accompanying training courses and materials that are specifically tailored to the needs and resources of small employers.

• Conduct outreach and awareness campaigns to familiarize small employers with the violence issue and disseminate model programs.

• Put workplace violence on the agenda for community policing programs, and add it to the list of concerns police officers address in their contacts with community groups and neighborhood businesses in a proactive effort to encourage reporting of incidents and/or problematic behavior to prevent violence.

• Compile and distribute lists of resources available to help employers deal with harassment of all types, threats and threatening behavior or violent incidents (e.g., mental health providers, public-interest law clinics, police, or other threat assessment specialists, etc.)

• Enlist the help of existing advocacy and community groups in publicizing workplace violence and prevention issues. Potential partners in this effort include neighborhood antiviolence and crime-watch committees, antidomestic violence activists, antidiscrimination organizations, ethnic associations, immigrant rights groups, and others.

• Develop proposals for economic incentives, such as insurance premium discounts or tax credits for small business managers who attend training or implement anti-violence plans.

• Establish cooperative projects in which larger local employers, labor unions, insurers, and business or industry associations, in cooperation with local law enforcement, help provide training and assistance in violence prevention for small business owners and employees.

• Incorporate an antiviolence message and suggested prevention plans in material distributed with Small Business Administration loan applications, licensing forms, inspection notices, correspondence on workers' compensation claims, and other federal, state, and local government documents that reach all employers.

• Create public service announcements and Web pages that call attention to workplace violence issues, outline antiviolence measures, and list sources of assistance and support.

These and similar measures will be more effective if they occur in the context of a broader national effort by government, employer groups, and law enforcement agencies to raise awareness of workplace violence prevention. During the last two decades, the Occupational Safety and Health Act has heightened public consciousness of other workplace hazards, while the activities of women's rights and other advocacy organizations brought increased recognition and dramatically changed attitudes toward domestic violence.

In similar fashion, if a national constituency evolves with the aim of expanding knowledge and public concern about workplace violence, it almost certainly represents the best avenue to extend preventive efforts to those employers and employees with the fewest resources of their own.

Barriers to WPV Prevention Practice

For some companies, a prevailing corporate attitude or denial of the potential for WPV, may be strong enough that employers and managers remain unconvinced that they need to address it. In some, violence is not recognized as a high priority among competing threats until a tragic, violent event occurs. In many organizations, the value of WPV prevention in reducing liability and turnover and increasing productivity is not well understood. Employers may also hesitate to explore WPV risks and issues because they are wary about negative company image, legal liability, assuming responsibility for workers' private lives, and worker enlightenment and empowerment. One line of thinking is that workers who become aware of these issues will certainly file complaints and claims.

Some employers worry that discussing workplace violence will only serve to scare employees and cause them to become hyper-vigilant and distracted. Others claim that talking about violence preparedness could incite disgruntled employees to test the system, or will inspire thoughts of violent retaliation to workplace grievances.

All of these factors are barriers to developing policies, providing training, recognizing and reporting violence, and developing and implementing WPV prevention programs. Workers readily perceive the lack of management acknowledgment of WPV and support for WPV prevention. On the other hand, corporate leaders who set out to raise awareness of WPV and improve workplace communication, demonstrate their acknowledgement of WPV and provide a foundation for improved reporting and risk assessment, and program development and implementation.

Violent events (especially Type 1 violence) are prevalent in small businesses where workers may lack a voice. Workers without a voice – that is, those without a personal opportunity to provide their concerns or participate in leadership decisions, or without an advocate to speak

for them – have great difficulty influencing the adoption or even the consideration of prevention programs. In many businesses, large and small, disconnects exist between management and workers that impede communication of concerns and collaboration.

About the authors:

Rita Rizzo is a threat management specialist with over two decades of experience in training topics related to prevention of workplace violence. Typically earning an evaluation average of 4.85 on a 5 point scale, Rita has been validated as a high impact trainer who delivers value-added content with a down-to-earth style. Over 5,000 training participants can attest to her effectiveness in providing best practice approaches to quelling violence in tense environments.

As someone who has survived being taken hostage, Rita brings a unique insight to her work. Rita's history with violence prevention includes experience with training over 500 nurses at the Cleveland Clinic in safety awareness and unarmed self-defense. Additionally she has trained over 1,000 home visitors, primarily nurses and DHS social workers in safety awareness for home visitors and unaccompanied women. As a former mental health nurse and Department of Corrections contractor, Rita is masterful at verbal de-escalation of potentially violent others.

Ms. Rizzo is popular presenter for Government Training Inc , the National League of Cities Conference, The Ohio Human Services Director's Conference, and The Ohio Child Support Enforcement Conference. Rita was also well received at the North Carolina Governor's First Annual Conference on Diversity, The National Pre-trial Workers Conference, and numerous American Society of Mechanical Engineers conferences throughout the US and Europe.

Rita is the author of the book The Culture of Generational Poverty: Providing Meaningful Help to the Impoverished. She is a Certified Management Consultant through the Institute of Management Consultants, the highest earned designation in her field, and holds a Master of Science Degree in Training and Human Resource Management from the University of Leicester in Leicester, England. She is also a Certified Conflict Mediator, certified through the Mediation Training Institute International.

Don Philpott

Don Philpott is Senior Book Editor for Government Training Inc. He also serves as editor of International Homeland Security Journal and has been writing, reporting, and broadcasting on international events, trouble spots, and major news stories for over forty years. For twenty years he was a senior correspondent with Press Association—Reuters, the wire service, and traveled the world on assignments, including Northern Ireland, Lebanon, Israel, South Africa, and Asia.

Formerly editor of Homeland Defense Journal, he writes for magazines and newspapers in the United States and Europe and is a regular contributor to radio and television programs on security and other issues. He is the author of more than ninety books on a wide range of subjects and has had more than five thousand articles printed in publications around the world. His most recent books are Integrated Physical Security Handbook, , Securing Our Schools, and Is America Safe? He is also a coauthor of The Wounded Warrior Handbook and Workplace Violence Mitigation. He has written special reports on ''Protecting the Athens Olympics,'' ''The Threat from Dirty Bombs,'' ''Anti-Terrorism Measures in the UK,'' ''Nanotechnology and the U.S. Military,'' and ''The Global Impact of the London Bombings.''

Born in the United Kingdom, he is now an American citizen working out of Orlando, Florida.

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