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Workplace Violence Prevention: That Couldn't Happen Here?

By: Jennifer Brown Shaw and Geoffrey M. Hash

Workplace violence incidents remain in the news. The headlines contain shocking accounts of attacks at workplaces of all sizes, in the public and private sectors. The industries involved range from academia to office environments, from government offices, to manufacturing settings. The locations vary from Connecticut to Texas; from Albuquerque to Baltimore. Perpetrators and victims alike come from all backgrounds, crossing gender, race, socio-economic, educational, professional and virtually all other lines.

Yet, the headlines only scratch the surface because the news media typically report on only the most sensational issues, usually involving homicide and guns. In reality, the problem of workplace violence is bigger than we are led to believe by selective coverage.

Because homicide at work thankfully remains a rare phenomenon, employers and employees may make the mistake of believing "that could not happen where I work." That attitude reflects a misunderstanding about what the term "workplace violence" actually means and how widespread it is. It also may lead to missed opportunities to prevent future incidents.

What is "Workplace Violence"?

According to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, workplace violence is "violent acts,

including physical assaults and threats of assault, directed toward persons at work or on duty." Such conduct varies widely in both form and degree.

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports there were 72 cases of workplace homicides involving a co-worker attacking another employee in 2009. While just one incident is too many, 72 incidents in a nation of 300 million people may cause people to dismiss workplace violence as a rare anomaly.

But when one counts homicides perpetrated by non-employees, the number of murders increases to about 800 per year. And according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics in a published report, there were on average 1.7 million victims of violent crime perpetrated at work between 1993 and 1999. 75% of these were simple assaults, but nearly 20% were aggravated attacks.

Thus, workplace violence has the potential for touching many more employers and employees than one might initially believe based on news accounts. However, that message has not reached employers, particularly smaller ones.

The BLS reports that less than 30% of all employers have developed an anti-workplace violence policy. Large employers of over 1000 employees are much more likely to have adopted a policy, according to a

2005 survey. That same survey revealed that only 59% of state government employers had developed a policy against violence. Again, the larger the government's employee complement, the more likely that the government adopted an anti-workplace violence policy.

The Myth: "He Just Snapped."

Some may believe those who bring violence to the workplace "snap," without warning. On the contrary, data suggest there are almost always warning signs. The Workplace Violence Research Institute researched over 200 incidents of workplace violence. It found that the perpetrator exhibited at least several pre-incident indicators. Larry Barton, a recognized expert in this field, conducted an even broader study of 1800 workplace violence incidents spanning 26 years. He found that perpetrators demonstrated warning signs in a full 71% of the incidents.

Employers should be especially concerned with employees who openly discuss feelings of workplace humiliation. Such employees are not only expressing frustration, they may be foretelling future action. Along the same lines, employees may signal to others that they are about to act out, through either talk of suicide or statements that demonstrate a lack of future orientation. For example, employees exhibiting such behavior may make statements like "I don't

know if I will be around for the company's July 4th picnic.”

Employees who bully or treat others less than equals are also cause for concern. Such employees not only have been perpetrators of workplace violence, but also the target.

There is also a link between domestic and workplace violence. Accordingly, if an employer becomes aware of a domestic violence issue affecting an employee, it should be proactive and resist the possible urge to “stay out of family/domestic affairs.”

Other conduct that can foreshadow workplace violence episodes includes: increased use of alcohol and/or illegal drugs, increase absenteeism, decrease in attention to physical appearance and hygiene, emotional outbursts without provocation and/or otherwise unstable emotional responses, mood swings, paranoid behavior, discussion of “fixing things” or “exit plans,” difficulty in adjusting to changes in workplace practices, discussion of firearms or acts of violence, repeated violations of company policies and discussion of the same, discussion of domestic problems in the workplace, discussion of changes to financial holdings.

How to Minimize Risk

Employers should take several steps now to prevent the worst from happening.

Conduct Preemployment Screening: Effective and consistent preemployment screening is one of the first and most important things an employer can do to prevent workplace violence. Specifically, running background checks in compliance with state and federal laws and actually checking

employee-provided references are two relatively simple and inexpensive preemployment screening steps.

Implement Clear Policies & Procedures: Clear policies and procedures addressing workplace violence prevention are crucial. Key components of an effective workplace violence prevention policy include: (1) a statement of “zero tolerance” for any act or threat of physical aggression and/or intimidation against any employee; (2) specific examples that illustrate the wide range of prohibited conduct; (3) a simple and clearly defined reporting procedure; (4) a statement requiring that employees immediately report such conduct; and (5) a statement that employees may make such reports without fear of retaliation. Of course, the words of the policy have to be supported by actions.

Train All Employees: Employee training is one of the most significant and effective ways an employer can take meaningful preventive action in this area. Employers should provide this training to all employees, including the rank and file. Supervisors and lower-level employees are on the ground and are in the best position to identify and report potential issues at an early stage.

Training regarding workplace violence should cover warning signs. It should also detail the specific reporting procedures in place for employees to use when they observe or experience such conduct. The training must encourage employees to report any threatening, harassing and/or bullying conduct at the earliest time possible. As Barton summarized, the message must be: “If you see it, report it.” As part of any policy, the organization must

provide employees with protection against retaliation.

Prepare for the Worst:

Comprehensive training must include safety and emergency procedures, in case an incident occurs. Employers must be prepared to deal with emergencies before they happen. Preparation includes identifying a crisis management team, establishing communication channels, public relations, and assigning areas of responsibility during a crisis.

Consider an Employee Assistance Program: Employers are increasingly relying upon Employee Assistance Programs, or EAPs, for help in this arena. EAPs are third-party vendors that can provide assistance with policy development and implementation, counseling hotlines, intervention assistance to help diffuse identified issues before they escalate, and, in worst case scenarios, crisis assistance and grief counseling. EAPs can be an especially efficient and effective tool in addressing workplace violence issues for those employers who do not have a staff of dedicated human resources professionals.

Respectful Terminations and Discipline: Because humiliation is a factor that runs through many workplace violence issues, employers can help prevent such issues by doing what they can to ensure that discipline and terminations are carried out in a respectful manner. Here, “praise in public and punish in private” is sage advice.

Take Action

There are many costs associated with an employer's failure to act proactively when it comes to preventing workplace violence. Workplace violence can obviously cause employees to lose their lives. It

can also severely impact an employer's reputation and public image, and can have untold negative effects on morale.

These are all very real costs that are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. As for quantifiable costs, nearly all fatal workplace violence incidents are followed by litigation that often results in multi-million dollar settlements and jury verdicts.

Non-fatal workplace bullying incidents can also lead to costly litigation. As discussed in our previous articles, courts and jurors are increasingly receptive to such bullying claims alleged under various legal theories.

Fortunately, employers can take the specific steps discussed above to prevent and minimize the risk of workplace violence. Though they

are relatively simple and inexpensive, these steps are nonetheless measures that will likely result in significant benefits. In the best case, an organization will never know exactly how significant the benefits are: by being proactive, it will have placed itself in a position to identify and resolve issues before they escalate to the costs of lost lives and reputation, and litigation.

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Jennifer Brown Shaw is a partner at Shaw Valenza LLP. Her practice includes providing regular advice and counsel to private and public sector employers. She also develops and presents seminars on legal issues in the workplace for management and non-supervisory employees.

jshaw@shawvalenza.com



300 Montgomery Street, Suite 788
San Francisco, California 94104
Tel: (415) 983-5960
Fax: (415) 983-5963

520 Capitol Mall, Suite 630
Sacramento, California 95814
Tel: (916) 326-5150
Fax: (916) 497-0708

<http://shawvalenza.com>