

AIRE Bulletin

Preventing Workplace Violence in Healthcare



Given the heightened risk of workplace violence in health facilities, there must be proactive, systemic approaches in place to prevent it and reduce negative outcomes. By prioritizing safety and patient care quality, healthcare facility leaders can create a more secure and effective working environment. These efforts not only protect employees and organizations but also enhance the quality of care provided to patients.

What is Workplace Violence?

Workplace violence is a problem facing every sector of business today. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, almost half of non-fatal injuries from occupational assaults and violence occur in health care and social services settings. Each event can cause major damage to organizations with the direct costs of operational interruption, property damage, physical and psychological injury and in many cases loss of life. OSHA defines workplace violence as the following:

“ Workplace violence is any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide. It can affect and involve employees, clients, customers and visitors. ”

There are currently no Federal OSHA standards for workplace violence. However, under the General Duty Clause, Section 5(a)(1) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, employers are required to provide their employees with a place of employment that is “free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm.”

Types of Workplace Violence

The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) categorizes workplace violence into four primary types. Understanding each type can help organizations assess their vulnerabilities and prepare effective prevention measures:

- **Type 1: Criminal Intent** – This involves violent acts committed by individuals who have no legitimate connection to the workplace. Their sole intention is to commit robbery, assault, or another crime.
- **Type 2: Customer/Client/Patient** – Violence in this category is directed at employees by vendors, customers, clients, patients, or any third party to whom services are provided.
- **Type 3: Co-worker** – This type includes violent acts perpetrated by current or former employees against their coworkers, supervisors, or managers.
- **Type 4: Personal** – Incidents in this category involve individuals who do not work at the facility but have a personal relationship with an employee and commit acts of violence in the workplace.

Keeping Violence Out of The Workplace

Workplace violence remains a significant safety and health concern in health care facilities. Such violence can manifest as threats, verbal abuse, physical assaults, or even homicide. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the health care sector experiences the highest number of nonfatal assaults resulting in employee time away from work, accounting for 45 percent of these incidents.

To address this issue, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommends that health care facilities implement a comprehensive violence prevention program as part of their overall safety and health initiatives. These programs are designed to decrease the frequency and severity of workplace injuries, monitor progress in reducing violent incidents, and enhance employee safety. Specifically, such programs:

- Establish a clear policy stating that violence, including both verbal and nonverbal threats, will not be tolerated in the workplace.
- Remove opportunities for retaliation against employees who report violence.
- Encourage prompt reporting of violent incidents by employees.
- Provide a plan to maintain a safe work environment.
- Demonstrate management’s commitment to employee physical and emotional well-being.
- Aim to ensure that:
 - All employees adhere to and support a violence-free workplace policy.
 - Employees feel comfortable reporting any violent incidents.

Why are Health Care Facilities at Risk?

Nearly half of violent incidents in health care involve patients assaulting employees, though violence can also occur between strangers and employees or among coworkers. No one is immune, and violence can happen at any time. Several factors make health care facilities especially vulnerable to workplace violence, including:

- Pharmacy areas with medications and money, which can attract robbery.
- Employees working evening shifts in areas that may have higher crime rates.
- Exposure to sometimes violent or mentally unstable patients.
- Dealing with uncooperative or combative patients.
- Presence of furniture or items in rooms that could be used as weapons.

Identifying Your Risk

Recognizing potential risks is essential for preventing workplace violence. Such risks include actions or words that endanger, harm, or intimidate others, or make individuals feel threatened. Examples are:

- Verbal or physical threats.
- Assault or other violent acts.
- Verbal or physical harassment.
- Any behavior that causes you or others to feel unsafe, such as bullying or sexual harassment.

While no approach can eliminate the risk of workplace violence, employees have the right to expect a safe work environment. Contribute to workplace safety by:

- Carpooling with coworkers during shift changes for safety in numbers.
- Using a buddy system when treating high-risk patients to avoid working alone.
- Keeping contact information for local authorities readily available in case of violence.
- Reporting violent or threatening behavior and other warning signs promptly.
- Taking all threats seriously.
- Participating in personal safety training to learn how to recognize, avoid, or diffuse potentially violent situations.
- Alerting supervisors to any safety or security concerns.
- Immediately documenting all incidents in writing.

Stay alert and ensure you are trained to handle potentially dangerous situations, including conflict resolution skills. Follow all policies and remain aware of workplace hazards to minimize the risk of becoming a victim of violence.

Staying Safe While Working with Patients

Patients can sometimes be the source of workplace violence. To minimize risk during patient encounters:

- Apply de-escalation techniques such as active listening, acknowledging concerns, and using nonconfrontational language.
- Demonstrate empathy and avoid defensive reactions if a patient is accusatory.
- Communicate clearly about diagnoses, treatments, options, and potential negative outcomes.
- Observe patients for signs of distress, including changes in expression, body language, or comments.
- Collaborate with colleagues and seek help when needed.
- Leave the area and call security or law enforcement if you feel unsafe.

Home Health Care Considerations

Home health care workers face unique challenges as they provide care within patients' homes, where there may not be the same protections available as in a hospital environment. Each visit presents potential risks, as workers enter settings that can be both unprotected and unpredictable.

It is important to recognize that verbal abuse from patients, their family members, or people in the community constitutes a form of workplace violence. Such incidents highlight the need for vigilance and preparedness when working in home settings.

Basic Safety Precautions During Home Visits

- Always stay alert.
- Assess each situation for the potential of violence.
- Pay attention to warning signals that may indicate an impending violent assault.

Vehicle Safety

- Keep your vehicle well maintained and ensure it is in good working order.
- Always keep windows rolled up and doors locked.
- Park in well-lit areas, avoiding locations near large trees or shrubs.
- Lock health care equipment, supplies, and personal belongings out of sight.

On Location

- If you are assigned to a high-crime area, consider working with an escort and schedule visits during daylight hours whenever possible.
- Verify that you have accurate directions to the residence before leaving.

- Inform your employer of your location and expected reporting times.
- Observe the surroundings and activities near the location before exiting your car.
- If there are any signs of threat or danger, stay in your vehicle and contact your manager immediately.

During the Home Visit

- Report any unsecured weapons you see to your employer.
- Present a calm and caring attitude to help defuse anger and support a peaceful environment.
- Refrain from engaging in behaviors that may be perceived as aggressive.
- Whenever possible, ensure that you have an open pathway for a quick exit.
- Trust your instincts and judgment in all situations.
- Avoid any scenarios that feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- If you are verbally abused, ask the abuser to stop. If the behavior continues, leave the premises.
- If you cannot regain control of the situation, shorten your visit and exit promptly.
- Use your cellphone to call your employer or 911 for assistance depending on the urgency.
- If you witness a crime, contact the police immediately.

Prevention Programs

- Implementing best practices is essential for mitigating workplace violence. Prevention programs should be comprehensive and tailored to address the specific needs of the health care environment. Key elements of an effective program include:
- A comprehensive workplace violence program, including policies against harassment and discrimination.
- Documented security procedures and programs.
- Written emergency preparedness protocols.

Physical Controls to Enhance Safety

- Adequate interior and exterior lighting.
- Controlled building access through key cards, fobs, or security bollards.
- Security hardware such as cameras and panic buttons.
- Restricted access to isolated parts of the building.
- Limit cash on site by using drop boxes and accepting credit card or check payments only.

Administrative Controls to Maintain a Secure Environment

- Employing security personnel.
- Visitor controls, such as sign-in procedures and ID verification.
- Maintaining adequate staffing to reduce wait times.
- Coordinating with local police departments.
- Procedures for working alone.
- Employee and management training programs, including:
 - Conflict resolution strategies.
 - De-escalation techniques.
 - Procedures for handling allegations of harassment and discrimination.
 - Recognizing warning signs of violence.
 - Promoting situational awareness.

Establishing an emergency preparedness program is essential for enhancing workplace safety. Facilities should implement active threat and shooter procedures, such as "Run, Hide, Fight," to ensure employees are prepared for critical situations. Training staff to stay aware of their surroundings and encourage them to report suspicious activities, following the "see something, say something" principle, helps foster a proactive safety culture. Coordination of tabletop drills with local police and the crisis management team further strengthens emergency response readiness. Additionally, conducting regular evacuation drills enables employees to become familiar with all available exits, ensuring swift and safe evacuations during emergencies.



Federal Agency Guidance

The following references provide guidance for evaluating and controlling violence in the workplace.

OSHA Guidance

- Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Healthcare and Social Service Workers.
- Workplace Violence. OSHA Fact Sheet, (2002). Also available in Spanish. Provides basic information about vulnerable occupations, employer/employee roles in prevention and protection, and recommendations for response to violent incidents.

Other Federal Agency Guidance

- [Violence Occupational Hazards in Hospitals](#). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Publication No. 2002-101, (April 2002). Increases employee and employer awareness of the risk factors for violence in hospitals and provides strategies for reducing exposure to these factors.
- [Workplace Violence Prevention Strategies and Research Needs](#). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Publication No. 2006-144, (September 2006).
- [Violence on the Job](#). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Publication No. 2004-100d, (2004). Provides streaming video resources that discuss practical measures for identifying risk factors for violence at work and taking strategic action to keep employees safe. Based on extensive NIOSH research, supplemented with information from other authoritative sources. Transcript also available.
- [Occupational Violence](#). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Workplace Safety and Health Topic. Provides basic information on workplace violence, including risk factors and prevention strategies.

Additional Resources

- [Workplace Violence Prevention in Health Care](#). California Department of Industrial Relations. This fact sheet gives an overview of the Cal/OSHA Violence Prevention in Health Care standard.
- [Cal/OSHA Workplace Violence Prevention](#). California Department of Industrial Relations. Resource page for Workplace Violence Prevention in Health Care.
- [Healthcare Workplace Violence Prevention](#). California Hospital Association. This publication describes how to comply with the Cal/OSHA Regulation.
- [Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries \(CFOI\)](#) – Current and Revised Data. U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Includes the category “Assaults and Violent Acts.”
- [Prevent Mass Violence](#) – Workplace. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

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