



## Corporate Exposure: On-the-Job Violence

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Is your company prepared to deal with the high costs associated with violence on the job? The most recent statistics released by the Bureau of Labor for 1992 indicated over 110,000 violent incidents were reported in the workplace; the cost, conservatively, to the business community was in excess of \$4.2 billion. These costs do not begin to measure the impact these acts have on employee morale and public opinion. Would you be anxious to dine, for example, at an establishment where four people had been murdered earlier in the week? (Some large restaurant chains have in fact made procedural adjustments and installed physical barriers to help thwart such crimes.)

Employers must lead the cause to prevent violence on the work site. Statistics reveal that homicide is now the second leading cause of death on the job, accounting for 20 percent of all deaths and second only to transportation incidents (40 percent). Further, the figures clearly show that homicide is the leading cause of death among all women in the workplace. Of work-related homicides, 82 percent involve shooting, 8 percent stabbing, and 5 percent beating. In addition, surveys show that 80 percent of all homicides on the job involve late night robbery.

The government has recognized these alarming trends and is wasting no time in trying to address this exposure. The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) has hired an attorney to review these trends and help develop appropriate strategies to curb these unconscionable losses. Legislation will be developed and, most likely, quickly passed through the review process.

Besides government standards that are being developed, litigation against

employers for on-the-job death has been geared toward what the employer knew and when, as well as what the employer should have known. Employers must properly review new applicants and screen prospective employees accordingly. There have been cases in which employers failed to conduct thorough background investigations of employees. The result was that less-than-desirable new hires were placed in positions in which, courts ruled, they posed a danger to the well-being of co-workers.

What can employers do to reverse the trend and properly protect themselves from harmful litigation? There is no one set of standards or model applicable to all organizations. Your company must first recognize this dreadful trend and make a decision to be proactive in diffusing violent actions.

Societal and cultural changes may be partially responsible for some individuals responding to situations in a violent manner. The human resources department, as well as other management professionals, must be trained to recognize such tendencies in individuals before a tragedy occurs. It is important to know the danger signs and never to ignore violent acts or threats. Employees should be encouraged to report threats or violent individual reactions to changes on the job. Those who display violent reactions to changes or adjustments in work schedules or job positions must be dealt with accordingly. The message must be clear and swift regarding management's position on any violent outbursts.

Organizations, especially those that are downsizing, need to have proper termination policies in force. Terminated employees should be given job counseling and assistance, if possible, in finding another job. It is important to keep in mind that the loss of a job is often devastating to an individual's self-esteem and sense of identity. We

have seen some firms experience a surge in worker compensation claims, particularly soft-tissue injuries, shortly after a plant layoff has been announced. Those companies that fail to prepare for employee reactions to loss of a job may be flirting with disaster. The creation of employee assistance programs (EAPs) has proven to be a cost-effective way to deal with stress on the job (which can often manifest itself in violent acts). Such programs have also helped individuals dealing with financial and personal stresses off the job as well; these stresses can sometimes result in employees filing worker compensation claims.

All of the strategies noted above are designed to deal with employees or former employees. But as also noted above, pre-screening and profiling are crucial in the development of a proactive plan. Certain profiling tools can identify individuals who may be prone to violent tendencies—substance abusers, for example—as well as characteristics that may point to potential violent behavior. Background checks, including a criminal check, are a prudent step. It might even be worthwhile, depending on your situation, to consider installing such physical barriers as bullet-proof glass.

On April 28, companies observed the sixth annual Workers Memorial Day, sponsored by the AFL-CIO. The observance included a moment of silence at 2:00 p.m. to remember those who have died on the job. Unfortunately, the list of dead is growing at an unprecedented rate—and violence on the job is a major contributor.

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