

Avoiding Violence in the Workplace

As the training coordinator for the City of Key West I get to go to trainings that normally I would not get to. I want to share with you a few thoughts from two different workshops that I have been to recently. I think both are relevant to our offices and One-stops. It is about being prepared and aware. After reading the material maybe you could share some of your offices policies about possible crises in the workplace, either from co-workers or clients. I will print them next week and we can learn from each other.

I hope that you have a great week.

Paul

Being Prepared and Aware

The first seminar was taught by a police captain from California who spoke to our police department. He spoke about the need for people to be trained on things that they normally don't do, rather than retraining on things they normally do. He talked about how good the Bolder CO Police are, however they bungled up the case of the little girl who was killed, her case is still unresolved. He pointed out the problem was that there is not a high rate of murders in Bolder, the police were not trained enough or as often as they could have been on the issue. Had the same crime taken place in a large city where the police are use to dealing with these crimes not much in evidence would have been contaminated. Lesson 1: A great staff is prepared staff and is ready for the abnormal so it doesn't turn into a crises.

That brings me to the second workshop Violence in the workplace. Our, trainer who was excellent pointed out a few things that could have prevented violence that has occurred at worksites where a man goes into a workplace and begins to shoot his co-workers or supervisor.

Here are a few things that I would like to share with you. First be aware when it happens most people say that they "did not think it could happen here". (Remember our lack of preparedness for 9/11 with a lack of airport security, maybe because of our "it couldn't happen here thinking.") There are lots of signals that are given from the potential perpetrator. I am sure that even some of our clients could fit into this. If everyone in the worksite is aware of them someone can intervene before the event takes place.

Here is a summary of the profile of the perpetrator. Predominately white male between the ages of 25-40 years old, he does not handle stress well. He does his job but complains and undermines the organization. He is manipulative and socially withdrawn. He has a difficult time accepting criticism and dealing with authority. He usually has a fascination with guns and may be experiencing family problems. This added with stress in his job or layoffs or major changes in the job could create problem problems. Again this is just a few of things about the profile it could be anyone. Probably at one time or

another all of us may fit the profile sometimes. You may feel this way today. There are a few red flags that you can look for in the process.

Red Flags

Verbal threats (Does your office have a policy on this and defines what a threat is?)

Loud outbursts

Poor employee supervisor relationship

Bringing weapons on Company property to "show to friends."

Overt signs of depression and/or substance abuse

Withdrawal signs (e.g. change in appearance, taking personal pictures down, reduced communication level).

Romantic obsession with a co-worker.

Increase in tardiness, sick leave, and requests to depart early.

Employee's expression of fear toward another employee.

Employee who suddenly withdraws all funds from Company sponsored 401K or Credit Union.

These are some of the signs and if everyone is aware things can be done to offset the consequences.

Lesson 2: Be aware of a potential crises and avert it.

Questions for this week's discussion: has everyone been trained to be aware of potential violence signs and is there a policy in place that helps stop some of the problems? If you have any ideas or your office has policies please share them and maybe we could discuss the issues even more.

RESPONCES

I have enclosed some interesting experiences and tips from our co-workers about violence in the workplace. Next week I would like to address case plans for clients, if you have a form that you like, could you email it and I can pass it on. I have developed a new workshop that deals with Leadership in Management and building teams. If you think you would be interested let me know and I can email you a flyer on it.

Have a great week

Paul

VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE RESPONSES

About 10 years ago our organization experienced the death of a co-worker who was shot by a client. After that we went through quite a few training sessions on how to identify possible risks and how to avoid violence. Here are a few ideas on avoidance:

Trust your instincts. If you feel uncomfortable, afraid, threatened you probably are right. Arrange your office so you can have an easy exit.

Never take a person that you fear, into the privacy of your office. Stay out in the reception area to talk to them and you stay between them and the nearest exit.

Plan a warning word or phrase that all of your staff knows. Use it to warn staff members that they need to leave the office immediately and call the police.

Never stay in the office with a volatile person because you are afraid they might damage property. Property can be replaced; people cannot.

Don't be afraid to call the police because you think you will look stupid or silly. They need to be aware of possible threats and they may even know this person from past run-ins with the law.

Review procedures several times a year with your staff to keep it fresh in everyone's mind.

One other thing I do is if any staff member is going to be alone in the office they must lock the doors. I would rather inconvenience a customer than have harm come to an employee. Susan MI

Your newsletter is timely. Friday, one of my enrollees who is the most calm wonderful woman I have had, laid in the back of her ex son-in-laws pickup for hours waiting for him to return. When he did, she calmly pulled out a hand gun and began shooting at him. He was hit once and fled in to a restaurant and she stood in the parking lot, reloaded the gun and calmly walked through the restaurant where he was hiding in the kitchen and unloaded the rest of her bullets in to him. Of course he is dead by then. She laid down the gun and sat down and waited for the police. We have all been so sad over the weekend, not for him, but for her that she had to take matters in to her own hands. She had bought a disguise weeks ago and then a handgun two weeks ago. Goes to show, although this is not violence in the workplace for us, it was for the many many patrons in the restaurant who witnessed it and for the kitchen staff who REALLY witnessed it. CA

I am so glad you are addressing violence in the workplace and training staff to be aware of warning signs. We encounter many clients that occasionally have outbursts in our office, are manipulative, and have severe mental health issues. A small number of our staff recently attended a seminar that addressed general mental health issues and mental disorders, etc. Although it didn't train us specifically on how to handle violence in the workplace, I felt it was a positive start to open up some doors to train our entire staff to be more aware and informed. As far as a policy in place, I'm sure our main office has policies on how to handle a potentially violent co-worker or client, but I wouldn't be able to tell you what it is! So, I don't feel we are prepared to handle a situation effectively if it arose today. CA

I thought this was a great (and very relevant) topic for discussion. Every county employee here goes through Violence in the Workplace training as a part of the professional conduct element of our positions. I believe it does give us an element of

preparedness; however, it tends to focus (or at least it did when I attended, which was prior to 9/11) much more on threats from external customers rather than co-workers. A major issue I felt was not covered adequately was the possibility of a batterer following their significant other to the workplace. It's estimated that a great deal of women have to deal with this, so I would like to see that addressed not only for the individual's safety but for that of the office - and presented in a way that stresses that the abused is the VICTIM and should not be ostracized because of it. Also, how can we effectively counsel our customers on how to deal with a similar situation at their place of employment if we are unable to do so ourselves? Along similar lines, I feel that the County's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a great program and can be enlisted to help employees straighten out personal affairs that might lead to such violent behavior, but only if they know about it. Its availability and the services offered have not been persistently and extensively publicized, at least not at this site. Hillary CA

I enjoyed reading your summary regarding violence in the workplace. Just recently I was 'trapped' in my office by a irate client. Although my coworkers could hear him yelling at me no one bothered to check to see if I was alright. I am a trained CPS worker as well as a Crisis Intervention Counselor by my efforts to calm him down failed. I sensed that I was in danger and picked up the phone and called 911, the police responded quickly. However I was torn up emotionally because none of my co-workers even acknowledged there was a problem until a uniformed officer was knocking on my office door. One co-worker even stated that she is 'used to people hating CPS workers and thought it was his yelling at me was 'normal'. We are slowly working to establish a safety program in the workplace.

A few years ago I was working at our local mental health center and a client was taken to the nurses office for his monthly injection. Although he had exhibited no symptoms of psychosis or agitation he stabbed the nurse. She was somewhat blamed by the agency for the incident although the workers had requested an emergency button and/or security system be put into place for months prior to the incident.

To my knowledge the agency has yet to update its security system. I know that if someone is truly out to harm you it will happen no matter what. However common sense tells us that by taken some precautions we can protect ourselves as well as fellow employees. Such as appropriate safety training for all employees, some security system in the office place [no necessarily expensive metal detectors or security officers but crisis alarm buttons to notify the police] when/if necessary. My job send me into clients homes, this also puts me at a higher risk of harm. Luckily anytime I feel that the situation could be dangerous I can get a police officer to assist me on the call. But I would like to have self defense training.

I was frightened by a violent co-worker a few years ago to the point I went to my supervisor and informed her of his bizarre behavior. She quickly responded and he received the psychiatrist help he needed. I recall that every body was concerned about his actions: smoking a cigar in the office, throwing a bouncing ball against the wall for over 2 hours, sent flowers to female co-worker although she was not interested in dating a married man, he claimed to be a famous person, he broke someone else's property, stole

liquor from clients, but no one wanted to report him. I was not only frightened for myself but for him, he was so out of control. ANONYMOUS

Since I'm a Job Developer with the County Dept. of Corrections, it's my job to keep everyone on probation employed. All my clients have felony records. Since I take my clients out personally to some of their interviews I have to be keenly aware of safety issues. Luckily, my agency has given me a lot of safety training and I am familiar with what your talking about. Thanks for helping spread the word. Billey KS

Regarding workplace safety, here is the strongest thought that I came away with from a training we received a few months ago. I work at a one stop Resource Center, and like most, we share the building with many other providers including but not limited to: EDD, AODS (Alcohol and Other Drug Services), Dept. of Rehab (Which by the way are mandated by the State to have bullet proof glass between receptionist and waiting area), etc. I list a few partnering agencies primarily to remind myself of the variety of services being offered to those who obviously need them. Frustrations can fly easily with any of these partnering agencies, as well as with WIA, which is what I do. We are also located just across the street from a public park.

Learn and stay current on what the homemade bombs look like. One in particular that brought me to conscientiousness was an explosive device that looks like a water bottle with crumpled alum union foil in it with tea colored liquid. With the trend of water bottles, this could be considered as trash. The contents builds in pressure, and if slightly disturbed, will explode forcing fire and scraps of foil out up to 10 feet away. Many homemade explosives are discovered on the internet by the way. Type in bombs or homemade bombs and see what I am talking about. SO SCARY!!! People are really feeling the squeeze from welfare to work and also the cutbacks from EDD are causing a new level of anger. There is more automation and less services to help in filing claims, job search, etc. People's livelihood is being threatened, and some are not dealing with it very well. Pamela CA

Last year all the staff in our One-Stop attended a seminar in our office presented by an officer of the CA Highway Patrol. The seminar was titled "Violence in the Workplace." Front line staff had been requesting this training because we were concerned about the potential violence from customers. Some of the job seekers who use our resources are very frustrated and/or irritated that they are unemployed or are being forced by the "system" to look for work.

The training dealt with the information you have already mentioned. We were given the "profile" of the potential perpetrator as well as techniques to use when confronted. Things like remaining calm, removing sharp objects from our desks, having a secret password when things are getting volatile. Giving ourselves permission to call the authorities when necessary. Cinthia - Calif.

You know "violence in the workplace" is a topic that most workplaces don't deal with until something happens and that is sad. People Inc. is a small organization and of course

we have the standard rules about absenteeism, drugs and alcohol on premises, and threats of violence. They are just basic policies listed in the handbook that says "Don't Do It". The only incidents that I know of that scared the employees enough to take notice was when an angry, jealous husband was hanging around the building and stalking a wife, the police were called and then he left, However, he continues to come around and hang outside waiting on his wife and that sounds like it could be a potential problem, in my opinion. So I guess we too will be one of those organizations that will be unprepared and probably handle the situation all wrong!.What's the answer to get employers to recognize that violence can occur at any time in any place?.. Patricia VA