Employers Can Lower Workplace Violence Risks

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The fatal shootings at the University of Alabama, Huntsville, should serve as a much-needed wake-up call for S.C. employers to assess and address the risk of workplace violence. As the third major workplace tragedy of 2010, this incident reminds us that violence can occur anywhere - and South Carolina's poor record with domestic violence predisposes us to spillover workplace tragedies

In the aftermath of the Huntsville campus shootings, questions are being asked about how a person who had past encounters with violence ever could be hired. The incredulity presupposes that university officials were aware of the shooter's history or somehow missed it in the hiring process. Of course, the perpetrator had a Harvard doctorate and likely had solid references. Sterling credentials often lead to truncated background searches, and in this case, one of the prior serious events, the killing of her brother, occurred more than 20 years ago.

But such critical second-guessing serves to remind employers that employees and their families expect that reasonable steps be taken to provide safe workplaces. Employers have obligations under federal and state laws to ensure workplace safety, based on the assumption that some situations are foreseeable and preventable, typically because of the employee's background or because of observed behavior on the job. Businesses should learn from the lessons of these recent shootings and implement measures to reduce the risk of workplace violence.

We all want to believe that we work at places where we are basically safe, but there is a level of risk at every place of employment. By implementing comprehensive policies geared toward workplace safety, employers will significantly reduce the risk that their office will be the site of the next tragedy.

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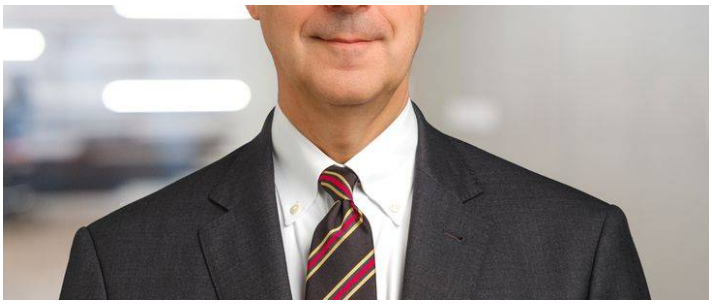

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