

Reduce the Risk of Workplace Violence

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The possibility that a tragic event may occur at an office or place of employment is not first and foremost on the minds of every worker. But when it happens, it makes the news and strikes fear among all workers.

The number of work-related homicides rose by more than 40 percent from 2006 to 2007 in the state of Florida, according to OSHA's area director. Recent numbers are equally alarming. These extreme examples of violence are often entirely unexpected. However, employers are, by law, required to provide a safe workplace.

Many incidents are foreseeable and/or preventable. Recognizing a situation that may escalate and erupt into violence is often the key to stemming the violence. Through the use of effective pre-employment documents and thorough background checks, certain temperaments can be understood and situations avoided. Upon the potential hire of a new staffer, employers should conduct background investigations to discover prior convictions, litigation history, motor vehicle records, employment references, credit history, education records and other relevant background information concerning the applicant.

Further, it is incumbent upon management to establish policies on workplace violence and to enforce them. A written zero-tolerance position on violence, threats or abusive language allows management to terminate anyone who violates the policies. Drug testing may also be a manner of pre-empting violence. In addition, a workplace violence policy should also include a procedure to confidentially report threats and drug abuse. It is not unreasonable for employers to retain security consultants, psychologists or other professionals to handle threats quickly, effectively and legally.

No one goes to work with an expectation of conflict, let alone violence. Sadly, however, even an office can be a place of risk. However, with proper policies in place, the risk of tragedy can be reduced.

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