EASNA
THE EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE TRADE ASSOCIATION

EAP BEST PRACTICES

Responding To Workplace Violence

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Responding To Workplace Violence

The EAP profession has seen a growing need to develop solutions for employers with regard to appropriate response to the problem of workplace violence, and with good reason. It is estimated that corporate America spends $4.2-6.4 billion a year in the aftermath of workplace violence situations, responding to the approximately 2 million violent incidents in the workplace annually.

However, it should be noted that workplace violence has significantly decreased where organizations have provided training and implemented policies to prevent violence and threats of violence. There were 518 confirmed homicides at work in 2010. This is a 50% decrease since the peak in 1994 when the toll was 1080 annually [US Bureau of Labor Statistics].

In Canada, over the past 5 years, 66% of organizations reported an increase in aggressive acts within their workplaces, with 356,000 incidents of violence occurring in the workplace each year.

Currently, seven provinces in Canada have legislation or regulations in place to address workplace violence as it is estimated that the annual cost of Workplace Violence in Canada is now $7.6 billion.

Although no policy or practice can prevent all workplace violence events, here are some best practices that will minimize the likelihood of violence in the workplace.

Signs of a Troubled Work Environment

Employers should be on the lookout for any of the following signs suggesting potential problems with the work environment:

- Chronic labor/management disputes
- Extraordinary number of injury claims
- Frequent or increased employee grievances or complaints, particularly of harassment
- Understaffing or excessive demands for overtime
- High worker stress
- Layoffs and a corresponding increased workload for remaining employees, and
- Authoritarian management

Signs of a Troubled Employee

- Initial concerns
- Verbally abusive objectifying and dehumanizing language
- Non-compliance with policies and procedures
- Challenging authority
- Frequently argumentative
- Frequent complaints from customers
- Instigating and spreading lies and rumors
- Excessive use of profanity
- Inappropriate and sexually explicit language woven into conversation
- Angry outbursts; frequent signs of frustration

More Serious Concerns

- Making verbal threats
- Conveying unwanted sexual attention or violent intentions by letter, voice mail, or email
- Holding others responsible for the employee's own unacceptable behavior
- Arguing frequently and escalated intensity
- Blatantly disregarding organizational policy and procedures
- Setting traps for others with malicious intent

- Stealing from the company or employees
- Damaging company property

Warning Signs

- Fascination/obsession with weapons or violence in the media
- Substance abuse
- Indications of severe stress
- Suicidal verbalizations ("I can't go on like this.")
- Violent history
- Romantic obsession
- Evidence of domestic abuse
- Hostile or erratic behavior
- Change in personality or decrease in work performance
- Social isolation – avoidance of others at the workplace
- Declining poor hygiene
- Inability to get along with peers; poor work relationships

Ways to Avoid Incidents of Workplace Violence

Unfortunately, even employers sensitive to potential violence-related problems in their workplace or with their employees are limited by a variety of legal issues in their ability to maintain a safe workplace. Potential liability under the law may increase an employer's difficulty in securing the workplace but it also may increase an employer's responsibility to keep workers safe while they are at work. Legal consultation with the development and establishment of policies with regard to Workplace Violence is highly recommended. The following elements should be included in any employer's program to establish and maintain a safe working environment:

- An anti-violence/anti-harassment policy with clear definitions communicated to all employees and all levels of management,
- Educational programs on these policies and procedures for reporting,
- Pre-employment drug screening and background check,
- A substance abuse policy,
- Informed management,
- Fair treatment of employees,

- Counseling /EAP,

- Appropriate levels of security,

- A threat assessment team,

- An industry/occupational risk assessment, and

- Aftermath training/post incident interventions.

Every EAP should have a relationship with a Threat of Violence vendor/partner company that has extensive experience and a proven track record in the consultation and handling of Threat of Violence situations that are out of scope for an EAP. For more information about workplace violence prevention you are encouraged to speak with an EASNA Professional Practices Committee member.

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