

# PERSONAL SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE



IMPROVING RESPONSE TO PARTNER VIOLENCE



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## WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

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During the past few years Workplace Violence has gained recognition as a serious public health concern. It is estimated that each year more than two million Americans are victims of physical attack in the workplace. According to a report published by Northwestern National Life Insurance, one out of every four workers was harassed, threatened or attacked on the job between July 1992 and July 1993.

The National Safe Workplace Institute estimates that the cost of violence to businesses is \$4.3 billion annually, with an average incident cost of \$250,000. These amounts include all related expenses such as legal fees, ongoing medical treatment and other damages. Actual costs are difficult to estimate when we consider the psychological effect on the victims, families, and co-workers. The profound impact of a single violent incident expands into a loss of organizational productivity and morale that can last for years. The future of the organization is at risk when employees and consumers are threatened by the possibility of recurring violence.

It has become increasingly apparent that there are significant risks of violence within the workplace, arising from a variety of factors. Risk factors for workplace homicide include exchanging money with the public, working alone or in small numbers, working late at night or during early morning hours, working in high crime areas, guarding valuable property or possessions, and working in community settings. Workplace violence is not, however, caused merely by strangers. Disgruntled employees or former employees are often perpetrators of workplace violence, and it is not uncommon for domestic violence to carry into the workplace.

An increased tolerance for violence in society as a whole is blamed for the increase of violence in the workplace. Workers and clients are influenced by the behaviors and attitudes that surround them on a daily basis in their homes, in the media, and in their communities. After extensive research, the Centers for Disease Control determined that homicide was the leading cause of occupational death for women.

Under the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Act, employers have the legal responsibility to provide a safe and healthy place to work. This requires that organizations consider the physical as well as the psychological climate of the work environment. If an employer is aware of a potential threat to the safety of their workers, they are obligated by law to take action to correct the situation.

## The components of an effective plan for a safe work environment include:

- Policies and procedures for dealing with violence in the workplace;
- An identified crisis team to respond to incidents of violent behaviors;
- Training programs that help workers recognize early warning signs of violent behavior and the steps to follow in the event of a threat;
- Manager training programs that teach appropriate methods of intervening with potentially violent employees or clients and proper documentation of event;
- Designing the physical work space for optimum safety and protection including adequate security systems.
- One of the best ways to prevent workplace violence is to be aware of early warning signs and ready to take action.

## The following is a list of warning signs created by the Employment & Labor Law Services:

1. Direct or veiled verbal threats of harm.
2. Intimidation of others (physical or verbal.)
3. Carrying a concealed weapon or flashing a weapon to test reactions.
4. Paranoid behavior. Perceiving that the whole world is against them.
4. Moral righteousness and believing the organization is not following its rules and procedures.
5. Unable to take criticism of job performance. Holds a grudge, especially against a supervisor. Often verbalizes hope for something to happen to the person against whom the employee has the grudge.
6. Expression of extreme desperation over recent family, financial or personal problems.
7. History of violent behavior.
8. Extreme interest in semi-automatic weapons and their destructive power to people.
9. Fascination with incidents of workplace violence and approval of the use of violence under similar circumstances.
10. Disregard for the safety of co-workers.
11. Obsessive involvement with the job, often with uneven job performance and no apparent outside interests.
12. Being a loner who has a romantic obsession with a co-worker who does not share the same interest.

# Multnomah County Guidelines

**Multnomah County is committed to providing its employees with an excellent place to work, a workplace that is free from violent acts or threats against a person's life, health, well-being, family or property.**

It is the County's policy to prohibit threatening and violent behavior in the workplace, whether by County employees or by third parties.

Every employee shares the responsibility for bringing to the County's attention conduct that interferes with providing a workplace free of violence. We expect employees to talk with their supervisors or other managers about workplace violence they experience regardless of its origin, or for supervisors and managers to take appropriate correction action to stop or control violence in order to maintain an excellent place for employees for work.

# NOTES

## HOME VISITS AND FIELD SAFETY

### Personal Safety

Community Health Nurses and Community Health Workers, by the very nature of their work in homes and other community sites, cannot control the environment. The responsibility of personal safety rests with the nurse/worker conducting the home visit. The decision to initiate or continue a home visit is the nurse/workers'. The following information can help in making an informed decision.

### Plan Ahead

- Consider the area, situation and your "gut" instinct in scheduling visits. Many indirect clues about your safety will register subconsciously as "intuition."
- Contact clients ahead to assure correct address, directions and presence of client and/or partner. Leave schedule information with office, and call in at specified times.
- Carry only minimal cash and keep other items to an amount that is easy to carry. Keep change for pay phones.
- Dress for function and mobility, with a name tag visible.
- Keep your car in good repair, full gas and emergency equipment. Look into the car before entering, lock it when leaving or traveling.
- Carry your keys in your hand when traveling to and from the car. Keep a spare set of keys with you.

### Approaching the Home

- Carefully examine the area including neighbors, activity and indicators of crime. Look for animals, fences and hiding places: Note emergency assists such as pay phone, public buildings, etc.
- Park in well-lighted easy exit area, preferably right in front of the home.
- Avoid groups loitering, look for other entrances. If group is hostile, walk away and reschedule. Note exits when entering a building.
- Walk with confident posture, maintain professional attitude. If appropriate, acknowledge your presence and purpose to a group of people as you approach.
- Listen for sounds of fighting or disturbance before knocking. Leave if disturbance in progress. After knocking, identify yourself and use client's name. When door is answered, decide if you will enter or invite client outside. Do not enter if you suspect an unsafe situation.
- **TRUST YOUR GUT!**

## In the home

- Keep alert to activities in the home, others present, exits available. Be prepared to leave quickly should the situation suddenly change. Don't try to handle violent individuals leave and then call 911.
- Maintain your focus on the business at hand but don't forget your own safety at any time.
- Use professional and social skills as needed to deal with any persons in the home including managing angry people. Don't expect the client to protect you.
- TRUST YOUR GUT!

## Leaving the home

- Collect all belongings, keep your car keys in hand. Note any activities that may affect your exit. Take precautions as needed.
- Watch for cars following you as you leave. Don't stop if requested, go to the nearest well-lighted business or police station.
- TRUST YOUR GUT!

## Handling a tight situation

- Don't show fear, control your breathing.
- Speak slowly and calmly, be assertive without challenging.
- Repeat your purpose, check your watch and say you need to call your office or something else to divert aggression.
- Leave. Don't tolerate rude or hostile behavior.

**Practice ahead of time what you would do and say in a tight situation.**

**TRUST YOUR GUT!**

## Receiving support

Peer support is often helpful to the *CHN/CHW*. Discussing feelings, situations and issues that this work brings up is therapeutic. Nurses who have had personal or family experiences with violence may have special needs for support. Group sessions can be very helpful if led by a skilled person knowledgeable in family violence issues.

Another aspect of domestic violence that may be an issue for *CHN/CHW's* is the whole area of prevention. Activities are needed that focus on both individual and community levels. By getting involved in community efforts to reduce violence and all its effects, the nurse or CHW can contribute and get support in the process.

## EMPLOYEES EXPERIENCING PARTNER VIOLENCE

Steps you can take if you or a co-worker are experiencing partner violence in your personal life.

If you are being abused by your partner or ex-partner, you may be in danger even when you're at work. With some planning, however, your workplace can be safer and can also play important part in helping you keep safe. The following ideas can help you make your own workplace safety plan. For some of these ideas, you'll need your supervisor's support. Only you can decide whether you feel safe talking to a supervisor, coworker or security personnel. If you decide to share this information, you should also discuss your privacy with them. If your supervisor will be taking steps to help you keep safe, you should help decide who will be involved and what information will be shared with them. Remember, you do not deserve to be abused.

- You could get a restraining order or stalking order and ask the judge to order your abuser to not come to your workplace or call you there. If you have a restraining order or stalking order that does not cover your workplace, you may be able to go to court to ask the judge to add it. Your supervisor may be willing to get a trespassing order also.
- You could tell your supervisor, coworkers, receptionists or security personnel about your restraining order or stalking order, and ask them to call the police and let you know if they see your abuser.
- You could bring a current picture of your abuser to work. You could show it to your supervisor, coworkers, receptionists, security personnel or others who may see your abuser, and ask them to let you know if your abuser is around. You could also make color photocopies of the picture to leave with these people so they will remember what your abuser looks like.
- You could leave a description of your abuser's car and the license plate number with your supervisor, coworkers, security personnel or others. Ask them let you know if your abuser's car is around.
- You could ask your supervisor, coworkers or security personnel to write an incident report about any contact they have with your abuser.
- If you drive to work, you could vary your route and the times you leave for work. You could also ask for a parking space by an entrance or in a secure area, even if it's only temporary. Make sure you look carefully for your abuser before you park or turn off your car, and before you return to your car.

From "Domestic Violence Resource Manual", January 1997, issued by Multnomah County Department of Community and Family Services

- If you take the bus to work, you could use a different stop or take a different bus line. You could try to use a bus stop with other riders or near a business that is open during the hours you ride the bus. If you have a car, you could also drive to a park-and-ride to take a different bus. If you ask, Tri-Met bus drivers will drop you off between stops between 8:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m. You can also ask them to call the police if you are being harassed or threatened.
- You could talk to a coworker about carpooling.
- You could ask security personnel or a coworker to walk you to and from your car or bus stop.
- You could ask your supervisor to vary your work hours or transfer you to another position. You would also have to discuss confidentiality with your supervisor to make sure nobody tells your abuser where you've moved to.
- You could talk to your supervisor about access to your work area. Could doors be kept locked? Could all visitors be escorted by the person they are visiting? Could your office or workspace be moved to another location?
- You could ask your supervisor about keeping your employment status confidential. For example, you could ask to have your name removed from the telephone system and employee directory.
- You may be able to set up direct deposits so your paycheck, or at least part of your paycheck, goes directly to a bank account only you can access.
- You could keep a bag for emergencies at work. Include a change of clothes for you and your children, medication, copies of important identification or papers, your address book and any other important information.
- If you do not have a safe place to contact the resources you need to address the violence, talk to your supervisor about policies about using the telephone. You may be able to use a private telephone or receive phone calls.
- If you are worried about your abuser hurting or kidnapping your children or assaulting or harassing you when you pick up your children, you may want to consider finding a new child care provider.
- If threats escalate or you think your abuser is especially dangerous, trust your instincts. Take time off if you think you are in danger at work. Ask your supervisor about any special provisions for leave.
- Read through this regularly and think about how you would handle an emergency.

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Insert Multnomah County “General County Personnel Rules” Administrative Guidelines 119(1) Attachment A (4 pages).