

Worker Safety

Violence or the threat of violence is in national and local news on a daily basis. Unfortunately, hospitals and health care settings, especially front-line staff in hospital emergency departments, are far from immune to the trend of violence. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that 52 percent of all workplace violence incidents recorded take place in health care. The current health care environment in Missouri, including a shortage in psychiatric beds, the expanding opioid crisis, and the increased prevalence of weapons and narcotics among patients, only compounds the risk of violence in our hospitals.¹

To fully support a culture of safety in health care organizations, efforts should reach beyond the patient and include visitors and the hospital workforce, as well. Integrating the monitoring and reduction of workplace violence and injury with efforts of patient safety will help foster a comprehensive culture of safety within hospitals.²

To support hospitals in their efforts to enhance worker safety, MHA compiled the following information and resources for easy reference.

What is Workplace Violence?¹

MHA defines workplace violence as an act or threat of violence involving an explicit or implicit challenge to personal safety, well-being or health; and/or, other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs within health care facilities.

Workplace violence includes the following.

1. the threat or use of physical force, sexual assault, harassment or intimidation against a caregiver or employee that results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, psychological trauma or stress, regardless of whether the employee sustains an injury
2. an incident involving the threat or use of a firearm or other dangerous weapon, including the use of common objects as weapons, regardless of whether the employee sustains an injury

Identifying Potential Risk Factors of Violence

The following behaviors or conditions have been identified by experts as risk factors for violence. While not everyone with these factors will become violent, these are important red flags to increase your awareness.^{3,4,5}

- prior negative experience(s) at the facility
- financial difficulties
- substance abuse
- personal/relationship problems
- mental or physical health concerns
- unexplained absenteeism, change in behavior or decline in job performance
- depression, withdrawal or suicidal comments
- resistance to changes at work or persistent complaining about unfair treatment
- violation of company policies
- emotional responses to criticism
- mood swings
- paranoia

Did you know?¹

Health care employers are four times more likely to be exposed to workplace violence than any other profession.



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Key Strategies to Prevent Workplace Violence

Prevention of workplace violence begins with awareness, often referred to as *situational awareness*. Situational awareness involves paying attention and being alert to the current environment, including the behaviors of those around you. This also includes acting accordingly when red flags are identified.^{3,4,5}

Tips for Individuals in Preventing Workplace Violence ^{3,4,5}
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• encourage and promote courteous interactions• pay attention to behavioral warning signs• consider objects that could be used as weapons• practice and promote a team approach• assess your environment• trust your instincts• recognize and report any unusual behavior or threats• seek immediate assistance if necessary• do not allow yourself to be “cornered” without a way to leave a room or space
Tips for Leadership in Preventing Workplace Violence ^{3,4,5}
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• establish a zero tolerance policy toward violence of any kind• conduct mock training exercises with local law enforcement• create an emergency action plan• develop an organizational safety policy• control access to employee work areas where possible• improve staff reporting of potential safety risks, including abusive or volatile personal situations for staff• complete a safety risk assessment• enhance video surveillance• implement Mental Health First Aid training• redesign work space to prevent entrapment and have ability to barricade if necessary• create safe rooms

Communication Can Save the Day

Often, the way our communication is perceived by a potentially violent person can escalate or deescalate a situation. It also is helpful to remember that in a potentially violent situation, being right is not the most important goal. The goal is to not escalate the situation into a potentially violent or threatening encounter.⁴

The Crisis Prevention Institute provides these top communication tips.⁴

Be Empathic and Nonjudgmental — Try not to judge or discount someone else’s feelings or experience. Even when those feelings are believed to be inaccurate, it is important to remember that their feelings are important to them.



Respect Personal Space — If possible, stand 1.5 to 3 feet away from a person who is escalating. Allowing a person space tends to decrease a person's anxiety and can help prevent acting-out. If it is necessary to enter someone's personal space to provide care, explain upcoming actions so the person feels less confused and frightened.

Use Nonthreatening, Nonverbal Communication — The more a person loses control, the less they hear words, and the more they react to nonverbal communication. Be mindful of physical gestures, facial expressions, movements and tone of voice. Keeping tone and body language neutral will go a long way toward defusing a situation.

Avoid Overreacting — Remain calm, rational and professional. While it is not possible to control another person's behavior, all responses to their behaviour will have a direct effect on whether the situation escalates or defuses.

Focus on Feelings — While facts are important, how a person feels is the heart of the matter in tense situations. Often, people have trouble identifying how they feel about what is happening to them in the moment. Pay attention and listen carefully for the person's real message. Using supportive language will let the person know that you understand what is happening — and you may get a positive response.

Set Limits — When dealing with belligerent, defensive or disruptive behavior, give the person clear, simple and enforceable limits. Offer concise and respectful choices and consequences. Be clear, speak simply and offer the positive choice first.

Choose Wisely What you Insist Upon — If you can offer a person options and flexibility, you may be able to avoid unnecessary altercations.

Allow Silence for Reflection — While it may seem counterintuitive to let moments of silence occur, sometimes it is the best choice. It can give a person a chance to reflect on what is happening and how he or she needs to proceed.

Allow Time for Decisions — When upset, a person may not be able to think clearly. Give a few moments and allow some time to bring a calm for them to think through what has been communicated.

Violence Prevention Programs⁷

A written program for workplace violence prevention offers an effective approach to reduce or eliminate the risk of violence in the workplace when incorporated into an organization's overall safety and health program. The building blocks for developing an effective workplace violence prevention program include the following.

- 1) management commitment and employee participation
- 2) worksite analysis
- 3) hazard prevention and control
- 4) safety and health training
- 5) recordkeeping and program evaluation

A violence prevention program focuses on developing processes and procedures appropriate for the workplace in question.

Specifically, a workplace's violence prevention program should have clear goals and objectives for preventing workplace violence, be suitable for the size and complexity of operations, and be adaptable to specific situations and specific facilities or units. The components are interdependent and require regular reassessment and adjustment in response to changes occurring within an organization, such as expanding a facility or changes in managers, clients or procedures. As with any occupational safety and health program, it should be evaluated and reassessed on a regular basis. Those developing a workplace violence prevention program also should check for applicable state requirements. For more information, please see the resources section listed below.

HIINovative Practice: ⁶ Does your hospital have a process to support hospital staff and clinicians after workplace violence occurrences, patient sentinel events and mass casualties?

Critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) has long been provided for first responders and disaster workers who are exposed to high-stress and traumatic events. Health care organizations are beginning to promote this approach to support health care teams dealing with adverse patient events, as well as other traumatic incidents.

Whether clinicians are directly or indirectly impacted by an event or threat, there can be long-lasting effects. Many hospitals provide support programs for caregivers after adverse patient events.

Resources for support programs for staff:

- [When Things Go Wrong: Responding to Adverse Events: A Consensus Statement of the Harvard Hospitals \(2006\)](#)

“Most every ‘place’ is somebody’s workplace. So whether you are a patron or an employee, it’s important to be alert.” — National Safety Council

Resources:

- [MHA S.A.F.E.R. Program](#)
- [OSHA Hospital Workplace Violence Resources](#)
- [Medically Induced Trauma Support Services](#)
- [March 2018 Trajectories](#)
- [Toolkit for Building a Clinician and Staff Support Program](#)

HRET HIIN Resources:

- [Incident Response Guide: Active Shooter](#)
- [Active Shooter Planning and Response](#)
- [HRET HIIN Culture of Safety Virtual Event](#)
- [Culture of Safety Checklist](#)
- [Culture of Safety Change Package](#)

References:

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- ³ Workplace Violence. Retrieved May 18, 2018, from <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/>
 - ⁴ *CPI's Top 10 De-Escalation Tips* (Guide). Retrieved May 31, 2018, from Crisis Prevention Institute website: <http://www.crisisprevention.com/media/CPI/resources/CPI-s-Top-10-De-Escalation-Tips/CPI-s-Top-10-De-Escalation-Tips>
- ⁵ Is Your Workplace Prone to Violence? Retrieved May 19, 2018, from <https://www.nsc.org/work-safety/safety-topics/workplace-violence>
- ⁶ *Approaches to support health care teams after critical incidents* (Electronic mailing). HRET HIIN Culture of Safety Team. (2018, February 28).
- ⁷ *Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Healthcare and Social Service Workers* (Publication). (2016). Retrieved <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3148.pdf>



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