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WHITE PAPER

"Red Flags" Employers Can Notice To Help Prevent Workplace Violence

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“Workplace violence is any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide.” – Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 392 workplace homicides and 37,060 intentional workplace injuries caused by other persons in 2020. With incidents of workplace violence occurring on a regular basis, now is an opportune time for employers to explore possible solutions.

Some employers make the mistake of thinking there is little they can do to prevent workplace violence because it is a random and unpredictable event that is beyond their control. However, by not preparing for workplace violence, many employers could find themselves unprepared for the fallout.

While there is no surefire way to prevent all incidents of workplace violence, employers can substantially increase their odds of avoiding or mitigating such incidents by preparing a prevention program. This white paper will provide an introduction to "Red Flags" that may lead to workplace violence.



Keep in mind that workplace violence goes well beyond homicides that make the news. It is much broader than that, and often the initial “Red Flags” that may warn employers that some action may be needed are much less dramatic than a workplace shooting but nevertheless equally worrisome.

Workplace violence extracts an awful toll on everyone and can be devastating to workers, their families, and the organization in several ways. Beyond the loss of human life and the psychological toll on survivors and their families, the stark business reality of such acts can create a financial and legal nightmare.

Even lower-level acts of intimidation where no one is physically harmed can negatively impact the workplace. Argumentative, confrontational, inappropriate, or uncooperative behavior can create a toxic workplace and can potentially be a “Red Flag” that can turn into a larger issue if left to fester.

Workplace violence prevention starts with a clear anti-violence policy that is part of a safe and respectful workplace policy. Workers have the right to be in an environment where they can feel safe and they should be trained to say something if they see behavior that creates fear, threats, or intimidation.

Just as most employers now engage in sexual harassment training, employers should engage in training in workplace violence prevention. Firms should have an anonymous hotline or some other way for workers who see a worrisome sign to convey their concerns to management on a confidential basis.



Examples of "Red Flag" Behaviors That Could Lead to Workplace Violence

Although it is hard to predict violence or profile future dangerousness, certain behaviors can be “Red Flags” that employers need to be aware of to ensure a safe workplace. Here are concerning behaviors of workers that employers should take note of to help prevent potential incidents of workplace violence.

- Behavioral changes that include poor job performance.
- Depression or withdrawal.
- Destruction of property or threats to harm someone.
- Complaints about unfair treatment.
- Violation of company policies.
- Mood swings.
- Overreaction to criticism or evaluations.
- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs that are apparent to co-workers or numerous comments about personal use of alcohol or drugs.
- Pre-occupation or excessive talk about weapons and ammunition at work in a way that is intimidating or threatening.
- Behavior that appears to a worker as exhibiting paranoia. Although workers and managers do not need to be psychologists or understand the clinical definition of paranoia, most people can recognize behavior that shows delusions of persecution, unwarranted jealousy, or exaggerated self-importance.



Preventing workplace violence can be an example of "if you see something, say something." Even if the report is wrong, the old saying applies: "Better safe than sorry." Workers should be able to report such observations to management anonymously so the proper people can decide if any further action is needed.

If a manager receives a report or observes worrisome behavior and evaluates it as a serious current or potential threat, an employer may well want to bring in the assistance of other professionals. Employers are also well advised to assemble a team ahead of time to assist in determining a course of action.

In addition to the Human Resources (HR) department, the workplace violence prevention team can include an attorney, a safety professional or threat expert to look at physical security, or a psychologist with experience in this area. Perhaps there is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that can help.

In addition, security and threat assessment professionals may be of assistance in active shooter drills or other training that would help if a nightmare scenario of workplace violence should unfold. The team can also assess how well an organization is prepared for such a worst-case scenario.

Sometimes a background check is helpful to see if someone with violent tendencies is applying for employment. However, employers need to be careful about "Ban the Box" and fair chance hiring rules or about making assumptions that past criminal behavior automatically predicts future dangerousness.



Workplace violence can be costly for employers beyond the obvious injuries and loss of life to their workers. In 2022, a survivor of a workplace violence incident in which her supervisor shot and killed six of her coworkers filed a lawsuit against her employer asking for \$50 million in compensatory damages.

If workplace violence occurs, and a lawsuit is filed, employers need to defend themselves against allegations of negligence since the attorney representing the injured party will try to prove the employer either knew or reasonably should have known that a dangerous situation could occur.

Employers need to make sure they have a safe and healthy workplace, where everyone is respected and valued. Employees and managers must be on board when it comes to a zero-tolerance policy for behavior that creates disruption or intimidation and early intervention when potential problems are identified.

[ClearStar Provides Background Checks to Help Prevent Workplace Violence](#)

ClearStar is a leading Human Resources technology company that provides background checks, drug testing, and occupational health screening. ClearStar offers background checks that may help prevent workplace violence. To learn more, call (877) 796-2559, email sales@clearstar.net, or visit www.clearstar.net.

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