

Cincinnati Post

November 12, 2004

Killings at Job Sites Soaring

By Shelly Whitehead, Post Staff Reporter

Her co-worker's words seemed menacing enough.

"Back off," he told her. "I know where you pick up your kids."

But the woman still wasn't sure she should do anything – until she relayed the story to workplace violence expert Paul Viollis after his presentation at her company a few weeks back.

The woman told Viollis she didn't report the threat. "I'm a single mom and I can't afford to do anything to anger this guy," she told him.

"So, then I went to this guy's cubicle and, you know those Chinese throwing stars? He had 10 of them embedded at the top of his cubicle. – I was then blessed with the honor of terminating his employment," Viollis said.

The Delaware-based workplace security and violence prevention consultant tossed out dozens of similar stories Thursday morning during a two-hour presentation sponsored by the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce at Toyota Motor Manufacturing in Erlanger, Ky.

His message was clear: The problem of workplace violence in the U.S. is bad and getting worse.

And Viollis told local business leaders more than 99 percent of U.S. companies are not complying with laws that mandate they educate workers about the problem and take strong steps to prevent it.

The data backs up his claims, beginning with the FBI's declaration that workplace killings are the fastest-growing homicide trend in the country. The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health reports that currently in the United States, 17 people die each week in workplace homicides, with approximately 5,500 incidents of workplace violence reported daily.

Viollis – who helped develop a comprehensive workplace violence policy for Toyota Manufacturing – said most businesses are opening themselves to unimaginable tragedy and enormous legal expense if they do not act to protect employees from workplace violence.

In fact, Viollis said employee training on the subject has been required under guidelines issued by OSHA in 1996.

A poll of managers attending Thursday bore out the claim that few have complied with that mandate.

Only one of the dozens of companies represented had a comprehensive workplace violence policy in place.

The cost to American business from workplace violence is \$120 billion a year, he said. The average jury award is \$3.1 million per person per incident.

“The powerful part about this is workplace violence is completely avoidable – and it’s never spontaneous,” he said.

Those who commit violence on the job are usually men, almost always loners who feel bullied constantly and tend to be fascinated with weapons, he said.

Generally, Viollis said two things set them off – fear of losing their jobs or feeling constantly “picked on.” Then, he said, a continuum toward violence begins, usually with threats to a co-worker about hurting someone else at work.

“I’ve yet to see a case where the perpetrator didn’t tell at least five people what they were thinking and what they were going to do,” Viollis said.

He urged employers to educate workers and get them to disclose such threats at this early stage when the chance of peaceful resolution is much greater.

If not addressed, the person’s behavior intensifies, he said.

“This is when they may come to work and start boxing up their belongings, but they’re not quitting,” Viollis said.

“There may be final verbal threats and statements of finality. If you’re seeing them at this stage, you are 72 hours away from a violent incident, without exception.”

Copyright © 2004 Cincinnati Post.