

HR News

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Shootings Underscore Need for 'Aggressive Focus on Prevention'

By Kathy Gurchiek, Society for Human Resource Management

Police say an office worker killed one person and wounded two others at an office building about 15 miles north of Detroit on April 9, 2007, part of the latest rash of violence erupting in the workplace.

A week earlier, on April 2, a University of Washington researcher was shot to death in her office by a former boyfriend who then fatally shot himself, and a former boyfriend was the alleged killer of a woman shot while on her job at CNN Center's Omni Hotel the next day. In March, a disgruntled print shop employee in Signal Hill, Calif., shot and seriously wounded three co-workers and then committed suicide.

"What we're seeing in general is an increase in crime around the country, particularly in major urban areas," as well as the younger generation's "much higher propensity to use force to resolve conflicts," said W. Barry Nixon, SPHR, executive director of the National Institute for the Prevention of Workplace Violence Inc.

Historically there is a link between a general increase in crime and crime in the workplace, he said, but "typically there is a longer lag than what's going on right now," he added.

There are steps employers can take to protect workers and make their organization a safe environment:

- Train managers and supervisors on the early warning signs of potential violence, what the policy is, and how to address those warning signs.
- Implement a comprehensive workplace prevention program that includes a policy setting the framework and guidelines for dealing with workplace violence.
- Communicate with employees that the company wants to know when there are threats or incidents and that it is serious about handling those problems.
- Periodic risk assessments should be part of the prevention policy to determine what and where your company's vulnerabilities are. Tie assessments to safety audits to identify problems early.

- Implement access control on a regular basis. It can take various forms, including sign-in sheets and a camera system.
- Make it clear there is a reason for security procedures and that precautions extend to even persons familiar to the employer, such as an employee's family members or friends.

Workplace violence touched the workplace of Kathleen McComber, SPHR, MA, senior director of human resources at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock, Ark.

In December 2000, an employee reported to work as usual and then gunned down seven co-workers with an AK-47. He was angry because his employer had received notice that the IRS wanted to garnish his wages to pay back taxes.

It's imperative that employers pay attention to potential warning signs, says McComber.

"If you start looking at warning signs, there may be clues and hints that something might happen," she told *HR News*. "It's not that they walked into [work] that day and decided at the spur of the moment" to be violent. "They've thought about it."

Often, though, employers aren't prepared because they don't expect it to happen at their workplace.

"They may have a disaster plan with fire or hurricane" preparedness, "but they never think this is going to happen," she said of workplace violence. "It's somebody else's problem, and not theirs."

Two good resources she recommended are the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) (<http://www.osha.gov/>) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (<http://www.fbi.gov/>) web sites.

In addition, she advised developing a threat assessment team made up of representatives from HR, legal, risk management or workers' compensation, and security or operations management.

When an incident is reported, no matter how small, the team meets immediately to assess it and then take action based on its assessment scale.

"This is an immediate thing, and you get together and assess it and make decisions the very day," she said. "It's a very quick action. It's very similar to any sexual harassment investigation. You do not wait around."

A proactive workplace is essential, noted Nixon of the National Institute for the Prevention of Workplace Violence Inc.

"Organizations clearly need to have a proactive workplace violence prevention initiative.

We still see the last vestiges of zero tolerance, and by definition zero tolerance policies are reactive,” he said.

“Firms need to see a much more aggressive focus on prevention. They’re paying attention to the working signs, they are intervening when conflict first emerges and training supervisors on how to address those situations and they can deal with it.”

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