



CEO ADVISER

By Steven R. Peltin and Gregg O. McCrary

Hidden Threats

There are steps you can take to prevent violence in the workplace

More than 70 percent of workplaces in the United States have no formal program or policy to address workplace violence. Yet, as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) estimates, 2 million people each year are victims of workplace violence. Eliminating all such violence may be impossible, but employers can and should confront the problem in the following ways:

1. Take security precautions. Companies may deter violent acts by making changes to the workplace or to workplace procedures. If the perpetrator cannot enter the workplace or is intercepted before reaching the intended target, violence may be averted. Precautions could include controlled access to the workplace, enhanced lighting and visibility, alarms, closed-circuit cameras and cellular phones. Employee training is particularly important. Government or private security professionals can assist in evaluating and upgrading security.

2. Screen applicants carefully. Employers should try to exclude candidates with a history of violence or other unsuitable behavior.

3. Adopt and enforce a “zero tolerance” policy for violence or threats of violence. Companies should create a clear policy so the entire organization understands the commitment to proper workplace behavior and the protocol to follow in case of threats or violent conduct. Companies should ensure that the policy is enforced rigorously. Violence or threats in the workplace should lead to termination of employment or exclusion of visitors from the workplace.

4. Create and train a response team. Even smaller employers should have an experienced team to confront threats of violence – and to deal with the aftermath of actual violence. Team members should be available to confer on short notice and have the au-

thority to implement the group’s decisions. The team should include as many of the following disciplines as possible:

- **Human resources:** A human resources specialist would know workplace policies and procedures and have experience in dealing with troubled employees.
- **Legal:** An in-house or outside lawyer can help to identify options, keep decisions within the law and, if appropriate, help to shield deliberations with privilege. The lawyer could arrange for antiharassment orders and other injunctions and may serve as liaison to prosecutors.

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- **Security:** A full-time security professional naturally would be a team member. In smaller organizations, this function may be assumed by a safety manager, HR manager, office manager or outside consultant. This person often is the liaison to the police department.
- **Mental health:** An expert on emotional and/or psychological problems should be available on a consulting basis. This expert could advise the team or, if appropriate, intervene directly in defusing potential violence.

Company executives also may be on the team. With serious threats or incidents, public relations or media relations professionals may be helpful. Team members should be trained in recognizing and responding to potentially violent behavior, and they may serve as trainers for other employees.

5. Use the response team: If management

becomes aware of a troubled employee or other person who poses a risk of harm to others, or if there is a threat of violence, the team should:

- **Gather and share the facts:** First reports may be inaccurate. Team members should quickly learn as many details as possible.
- **Assess the risk:** Once initial facts are gathered, the difficult deliberations begin. Is the potential assailant merely blowing off steam, or is there a credible threat of real violence? Someone who makes a threat may not pose a threat, and someone who makes no threat may pose a substantial risk. What steps are necessary to prevent harm? What warnings should be sent and by whom?

- **Create and implement an action plan:** Elements of the plan could include security measures at the workplace or at the homes of potential victims; police or other law enforcement intervention; antiharassment orders or injunctions; communications with the potential assailant, possibly including offers of drug/alcohol rehabilitation or psychiatric counseling; and communications with employees, unions and others.

- **Monitor progress:** After the immediate crisis abates, the team should ensure that the same person does not make future threats or otherwise act inappropriately. The team also should periodically review and assess the company’s response to similar incidents and update workplace security, training, and policies and procedures.

- **Maintain documentation:** Documentation helps to ensure accuracy of information, preserve the group’s collective memory, and defend against legal claims.

Steven Peltin is a partner at K&L Gates in Seattle, specializing in employment law. Gregg McCrary, formerly with the FBI, is a senior analyst with the Threat Assessment Group.