



Dealing with Violence in Wake of the Attack in Orlando

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The weekend of June 11, 2016, saw another act of violence committed against innocent and unsuspecting people as they gathered together, an occurrence that has become all too frequent in today's world. While the latest attack took place at a workplace, it was committed by someone who wasn't an employee.

Many employers do a pretty good job of addressing workplace issues by conducting discrimination and harassment training for employees, but you may not be as prepared for an intruder who invades the workplace and commits acts of violence that end in death or injury to employees or clients and customers. It's unfortunate that we have to deal with and address these situations, but we do. Here are some thoughts on what we may be able to do better.

The first step is being prepared

The first step is conducting an assessment of your preparedness for an attack. To prevent attacks by outsiders on your employees, you should consider:

1. Assessing your company's vulnerability to an unauthorized entry or attack by a nonemployee;
2. Developing a formal security plan, taking into account the facility's size and location (i.e., whether it's in a high crime area), the type of product produced or service provided, the hours of business, and the frequency, degree, and nature of the contact employees have with "outside" vendors, suppliers, customers, or other nonemployees;

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3. Training employees, particularly receptionists or other individuals responsible for restricting access to the workplace, to spot unusual or threatening conduct;
4. Limiting or prohibiting on-site personal visits by friends, relatives, or others; and
5. Using visitor sign-in sheets, fenced-in employee-only parking areas located close to the facility, bright external lighting, alarms, panic buttons, locks, security guards, surveillance cameras, metal detectors, bulletproof barriers, or optical/voice identification systems.

Employers must implement well-reasoned, long-term strategies designed to eliminate or curb workplace violence. Some of the steps you can take include:

1. Assembling an incident response team to analyze problems, evaluate the company's ability to respond, draft antiviolence policies, train supervisors on risk reduction, map out escape routes, and conduct drills to test readiness;
2. Identifying jobs with a high risk of violence-typically those that involve contact with the public, access to weapons or dangerous instruments, or a low degree of supervision;
3. Establishing a system to report threats or acts of violence; and
4. Using employee assistance programs to help workers under stress.

When implementing your strategies for eliminating the threat of violence, keep employees (and former employees) in mind. Don't disregard an employee's history of confrontations or threats.

The second step is recognizing a potential problem

Recognizing the signs of potential violence is the first step in being prepared to deal with workplace violence. The second step is to report suspicious or troubling behavior to a supervisor, manager, or HR. Be aware of signs that may indicate an employee is capable of violent behavior, including:

- Making threats about "getting even" with coworkers or the company for disciplinary action or dismissal;
- Intimidating or threatening coworkers;
- Believing that other employees are out to get you;
- Being easily angered or very defensive about employment actions;
- Owning or talking about buying a weapon or bringing a weapon to work; and
- Using alcohol or drugs on the job or on company premises.

Moreover, employees should be alert to signs of potential violence by customers, including:

- Becoming unusually angry because of perceived slow service, poor product quality, or lack of information;
- Talking abusively while making a telephone complaint; and

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- Making threats.

The third step is initiating policies, procedures to prevent violence

Always be alert to any harassment in the workplace, including threats or physical attacks. Think about adopting a zero-tolerance policy against serious threats of violence. Make sure employees are aware that company property, desks, lockers, and storage areas are subject to being searched at any time.

Install electronic access points for the safety of your employees. Issue each employee an access card, and inform employees that you expect them to have their access cards with them at all times while they're at work. Warn employees that they shouldn't open locked doors for anyone who doesn't have an access card.

Require all workplace visitors to report to the receptionist. Visitors should sign in and be issued a visitor's pass. Passes should be limited to individuals who are conducting business with employees and need access to departmental areas. Prohibit ex-employees and anyone making a personal visit to an employee from accessing departmental areas. Think about installing a silent alarm to be used by your receptionist or front desk employees in case of an emergency.

Consider setting up a hotline that will allow employees to anonymously report any concerns about potentially "troubled" coworkers. The hotline should be accessible 24 hours a day.

If a situation that presents the possibility of violence arises, keep the following tips in mind:

- Don't meet with a potentially violent person alone. Invite someone to join you.
- Make sure you have an easily accessible exit. If there's an emergency, office furniture or cabinets shouldn't hamper your ability to get out safely.
- Be mindful of body language. Standing in front of someone may make him feel "blocked" in. Stand to the side and eight to 10 feet away instead.
- Keep calm and in control. Don't escalate any tensions. Speak in low and soft tones, and don't make sudden hand movements.
- Designate someone who will call the police if you give a prearranged signal that the situation has become dangerous. Wait for the police to arrive.

Finally, anyone working alone at night should comply with the following safety procedures:

- Inform someone at home that you are going to work late. Always let them know when you expect to leave.
- If you drive your own car, park in a well-lit area or near the entrance of the building.
- Ask someone to escort you to your car. Have your keys ready as you leave the building.
- Always check underneath your car as you approach it.

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- Before unlocking or entering the car, check the back seats and floor.
- Lock the door as soon as you are seated behind the wheel-before you fasten your seat belt.

Bottom line

Unfortunately, everyone has to be prepared to deal with the increased potential for violence in today's society. Thinking through how to respond to a violent incident now could save lives down the road.

For more information on the BLR, [click here](#). For more information on the South Carolina Employment Law Letter, [click here](#).