

Preventing workplace violence— Information for employers

The key definitions

Workplace violence is a broad term that includes any act where a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment by an individual or individuals, inside or outside the organization.ⁱ

Types of workplace violence are:

- **Threatening behaviour** - shaking fists, damaging or destroying property, throwing objects, stalking, pranks, anger-related incidences.
- **Verbal or written threats** – expressing an intent to inflict physical harm or threatening a person’s position, job, promotion or property.
- **Harassment** – discrimination-based behaviour that demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, annoys, alarms or verbally abuses a person and that is known to be, or would be expected to be, unwelcome. Find out what characteristics are protected from discrimination by human rights legislation in your area at www.redcross.ca/protectionlegislation.
- **Sexual harassment** – words or actions that cross another person’s sexual boundaries.
- **Verbal abuse** - swearing, rumours, insults and condescending language.
- **Physical assault** – hitting, shoving, pushing, punching, kicking, attempted murder.

Preventing workplace violence

Employers can meet many of their responsibilities to provide a safe working environment by building safety into their workplace design, administrative practices and work practices.

Workplace design considers factors such as workplace lay-out, use of signs, locks or physical barriers, lighting, and electronic surveillance. Building security is one instance where workplace design issues are very important. For example, consider:

- Positioning the reception area or sales/service counter for optimum visibility
- Positioning office furniture to keep the employee closer to a door or exit than the client
- Installing physical barriers, e.g. pass-through windows or bullet-proof enclosures
- Controlling access to all or parts of the building through use of coded cards or keys
- Minimizing the number of entrances to your workplace
- Using adequate exterior lighting around the workplace and near entrances.

Administrative practices are decisions about how business is done, including reducing the risks involved in handling cash:

- Keep cash register funds to a minimum
- Use electronic payment systems
- Vary the time of day when cash registers are emptied or reduced
- Install and use a locked drop safe
- Arrange for regular cash collection by a licensed security firm.

Work practices include all aspects of a job. People who work away from a traditional office setting (e.g., real estate agents or home care providers), can adopt many work practices that will reduce their risk:

- Have personnel prepare daily work plans, so their locations and times are known
- Identify a designated contact at the office and a back-up contact
- Keep the designated contact informed of location and activity; consistently adhere to the call-in schedule
- Check the credentials of clients
- Introduce the "buddy system"
- Educate all personnel on safe work practices: **Instruct them that they are NOT to enter any situation or location where they feel threatened or unsafe.**

Eight tips for preventing workplace violence for both employers and personnelⁱⁱ

1. **Assess your work environment:** Critically examine all areas of your work environment, including parking lots, entryways, reception areas, work areas, and offices. Is the lighting adequate? Are there convenient escape routes? Do you have a method to summon assistance?
2. **Pay attention to the warning signs:** Many people who become violent communicate their intentions in advance. Threats from customers, current or former co-workers, or third parties should be reported immediately.
3. **Promote respect:** The best way to prevent violence in the workplace is to foster a day-to-day attitude of respect and consideration in your work environment for co-workers and clients.
4. **Eliminate potential weapons:** Take a mental inventory of objects in your work area that could potentially be used as weapons. Remove or secure objects that could be thrown.
5. **Know your violence response procedures:** Violence Response Procedures are simple plans designed to minimize injury during a violent incident. These procedures should include a plan to summon assistance and move people to a safe area.

6. **Trust your instincts:** Don't ignore your internal warning system. If you sense impending danger, react accordingly.
7. **Use a team approach:** If you are in a situation where hostility could occur, use the "buddy system."
8. **Educate personnel—all staff, managers, senior leadership, volunteers, board and governance members, interns, and contract staff:** All personnel should receive education on the organization's code of conduct; what violence, abuse, harassment and bullying are; how to prevent violence; to whom to report concerns; and the organization's abuse, violence, bullying and harassment policies.

Workplace violence prevention legislation

Most Canadian jurisdictions have a "general duty provision" in their Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) legislation. The general duty provision requires all employers to take all reasonable precautions to protect the health and safety of employees, including protecting employees from a known risk of workplace violence.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jurisdictions in Canada with specific workplace violence prevention regulations include: Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Quebec (under psychological harassment) and Canadian federally regulated workplaces (organizations that fall under the Canada Labour Code, Part II). Read the workplace violence prevention regulations in your area at www.redcross.ca/protectionlegislation.

Contact local authorities to find out more about the specific laws applicable to violence in your jurisdiction.

Responding to workplace violence

Some workplace violence may involve criminal acts and therefore must be reported to the legal authorities. Harassment is a human rights issue while bullying is a relationship issue—but each may constitute criminal behaviour in some circumstances.

However, many forms of harassment and bullying can be handled within an organization using policies and procedures.

Guidelines for response to workplace violence are:

1. Know the laws and your workplace's policies
2. Follow the reporting guidelines established by your workplace
3. IF YOU ARE A TARGET OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE:
 - First, ensure your safety
 - Tell someone you trust

- Report according to workplace policies
 - Document what happened—facts, locations, dates
 - Adhere to confidentiality guidelines.
4. IF YOU SEE OR HEAR AN INCIDENT OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE happening to someone else:
- Make sure the person targeted is safe
 - Report according to workplace policies
 - Document what happened—facts, locations, dates
 - Adhere to confidentiality guidelines.
5. If you are an employer:
- Make sure all workplace violence prevention policies are in place and current: Code of Conduct, Harassment/Bullying/Workplace Violence, Child Protection
 - Develop a clear and confidential reporting system that encourages personnel to report and not worry about reprisals
 - Implement a Code of Conduct; ensure all personnel read and sign it and are held accountable for their behaviour
 - Outline clearly the disciplinary process, including investigation and resolution processes
 - Support targets of violence through Employee Assistance Programs
 - Educate all personnel on the policies and reporting requirements
 - Model respectful behaviour at all times.

RespectED: Violence & Abuse Prevention can help

RespectED: Violence & Abuse Prevention at <http://www.redcross.ca/RespectED> offers Respect in the Workplace and Ten Steps to Creating Safe Environments, online courses to help individuals and organizations eliminate workplace violence and build a safe, respectful workplace environment.

For more information

- Violence Prevention in the Work Place (from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada/Labour),
http://www.hrsc.gc.ca/eng/labour/publications/health_safety/violence.shtml
- Violence in the Workplace (from Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety),
<http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/violence.html>

ⁱ Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Crisis Prevention Institute, Inc., http://educate.crisisprevention.com/Workplace-Violence.html?code=ITG006SCWE&src=Pay-Per-Click&qclid=CJyYg_P127MCFQVgMgodUVoAbg

ⁱⁱⁱ Canadian enviroOHS,
http://legislation.ccohs.ca/legislation/documents/notes/oshleg/leg_viol.htm#PartTitle:Saskatchewan