Victim Services of Waterloo Region

Workplace Violence Fact Sheet no. 5

Violence against Health Care Workers

"More assaults occur in the health care and social services industries than in any other."

People tend to underreport workplace violence in the healthcare setting, as they perceive it as part of their job. Many employees don't see reporting the incidents as beneficial, or believe that it will be considered as a sign of their negligence or poor job performance.

Nurses experience the greatest number of assaults, but all other persons in the medical and social services field are at risk of violence from patients/clients or their friends and relatives. Particularly dangerous are psychiatric units, emergency rooms, crisis/acute care units and admissions departments.

Risk Factors

- Carrying of handguns and other weapons by patients/clients, their families or friends.
- The use of hospitals by police and the criminal justice system for the care of acutely disturbed, violent individuals.
- The increasing number of acute and chronically mentally ill patients being released from hospitals without follow-up care, who now have the right to refuse medicine and can no longer be hospitalised involuntarily unless they pose an immediate threat to themselves/others.
- The availability of drugs or money at hospitals, clinics and pharmacies.
- Factors such as unrestricted movement of the public in clinics and hospitals; the presence of gang members, drug or alcohol abusers, trauma patients or distraught family members and long waits in emergency or clinic areas, leading to frustration amongst patients/clients and their accompanying relatives or friends.
- Lack of training of staff in recognizing and managing escalating hostile and assaultive behaviour.

Recommendations for Reducing Violence

- Adopt a written violence-prevention program, communicating it to all employees and designating a "Patient Assault Team" task force or coordinator to implement it.
- Advise all patients and visitors that violence, verbal and non-verbal threats, and all related behaviour will not be tolerated.
- Set up a trained response team to respond to emergencies.
- Encourage employees to promptly report incidents and to suggest ways to reduce or eliminate risks.
- Review workplace layout to find existing/potential hazards; install and maintain alarm systems and other security devices such as panic buttons, handheld alarms or noise devices, cellular phones and private channel radios where risk is

apparent or anticipated; and arrange for a reliable response system when an alarm is triggered.

- Use metal detectors to screen patients/clients and visitors for guns, knives or other weapons.
- Establish a liaison with the local police, reporting all incidents of violence, and provide them with a floor plan of the facilities to expedite emergency response/investigations.
- Ensure adequate staff coverage at all times.
- Set up a system to use chart tags, logbooks or other means to identify patients and clients with assaultive behaviour problems.
- Institute a sign-in procedure with passes for visitors and compile a list of "restricted visitors" for patients with a history of violence.
- Control access to facilities other than waiting rooms, particularly drug-storage or pharmacy areas.
- Provide medical and psychological counselling and debriefing for employees experiencing or witnessing assaults and other violent incidents.

Small Business

Small businesses account for a large percentage of employers. While small businesses are varied in income range and occupations, they are often employ low income, low status positions that may be filled by persons of various minority groups. These businesses are at risk of workplace violence like larger businesses, but are less likely to have protection and prevention plans in place.

Obstacles for Small Businesses to Overcome

- Small businesses rarely have their own security force, training capability, employee assistance program, medical service, legal advisors or human resources department.
- They have less capacity to screen job applicants.
- Less likely to have policies or procedures for employees to report threats of violence.
- Less likely to have an established relationship with law enforcement or social service agencies.
- Owners/managers typically lack specialised knowledge/skills in legal/HR issues relating to workplace violence.
- Owners/managers are typically unaware of the resources available to help them with a potentially violent worker or an employee who is being victimised.
- Often of a culture or language other than the majority, which makes accessing information and assistance difficult.
- Less likely to offer health insurance or sick leave, leaving their employees vulnerable.
- Less aware of legal rights, leaving them more vulnerable to threats, and more likely to punish the victim.

The next fact sheet in this series will address dealing with the aftermath of an incident.

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