

Violence at Work - *It's Preventable*

Susan is a social worker in a state agency. She has the difficult assignment of investigating child abuse cases. The pressure is on. Her caseload has increased over the years. She spends most of her time in the field – alone – making home visits. She almost always expects a hostile reception to her visits. She can't count the times that she has been threatened by abusive parents and guardians. She has never been physically assaulted, but she worries that one day someone will point a gun and shoot her.

Susan's agency has a loose agreement with the public safety office (police) in her town, but she cannot be guaranteed an escort for all her visits. Her agency does not have a comprehensive workplace violence prevention policy or program. She is not issued a cell phone or other protective equipment.

AFT Public Employees believes that state workers should not have to put up with mental and physical abuse like this. Everyday state and public employees go to work they confront an increased risk of workplace violence. According to the National Bureau of Justice Workplace Violence Survey (U.S. Department of Justice), 37% of all workplace assault victims are public employees while they represent only 16% of the total US work force.

Something has got to be done. State governments and their agencies have been slow to develop good, systematic policies and programs to protect their employees. Toward that end, AFT is working to get good comprehensive workplace violence prevention programs in every state with our members.

What is workplace violence?

Workplace violence is more than physical assault. It is also verbal abuse, unwanted sexual advances and the threat of physical violence. Even if a worker is never physically injured, the stress of anticipation of violence may result in serious stress-related health problems.

WORK
shouldn't
HURT

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Employees often do not report these threats. Reasons include:

- ❑ *“It’s part of the job”*. In certain jobs, attacks may be seen as something workers must put up with
- ❑ *“Fear of blame or reprisal”*. Too often agencies hold the worker responsible for any threat or violent act that involves a client
- ❑ *“Lack of management support”*. Workers may be actively discouraged from reporting problems to management
- ❑ *“No serious injuries”*. When physical injuries are minor and the worker does not miss a day of work, the injury is not reported
- ❑ *“Not Worth the Effort”*. If workers think nothing will be done, they will be less willing to take the time to file a report

Who is affected?

Workers are most likely to be assaulted when they:

- ❑ come in contact with patients, clients and inmates who may be violent
- ❑ must work alone
- ❑ handle money or tax audits

Why are workers assaulted?

Each incident of violence has its own set of causes. Working with clients or patients who may be frustrated, angry, mentally disturbed or under the influence of drugs or alcohol inevitably carries with it the potential for violence.

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Some specific factors, which commonly play a role, are:

1. Understaffing, so that people must work alone or without enough staff to provide good coverage.
2. Lack of Training for workers in recognizing and defusing potentially violent situations
3. Working in the field alone. Tax auditors, social workers, public and mental health nurses must often work in the field alone.
4. Lack of security safeguards for public building access. Many state buildings have lax or non-existent security measures to screen visitors.
5. No security in garages and parking areas around public buildings in marginal neighborhoods.

What can we do about it?

Workplace violence is preventable. We now have the evidence that if good programs are put in place, the assault and threat rates go down. Getting these programs takes involvement of all FPE members at all levels.

On the local level:

- The first step is finding out what is going on at your worksite or in your agency. AFT Public Employees recommends that members form a workplace violence committee or work through the local health and safety committee to gather information. A sample assault on the job survey is attached.

The committee can also collect any incident reports, workers compensation reports and/or other information on the number and types of incidents at the workplace

When no other documentation is available, the committee can design a union incident report that can be collected by the steward or building representative. The incident reports could then be analyzed on a regular basis (bi-monthly or quarterly etc.)

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The committee can also collect and evaluate any existing workplace violence prevention policies that exist and make recommendations for strengthening the document

- Approach management with your findings and recommend a joint labor-management workplace violence prevention committee. Management representatives should have the authority to act on the recommendations and findings of the committee

The committee's responsibilities would include:

- A complete worksite and job assessment for potential risks of violence. Such an assessment would include a walkaround of the building noting physical environmental factors, worker isolation and lack of secure entrances/exits.
- Development of a comprehensive workplace violence prevention policy for the agency which would include:
 - Training for all employees on prevention of workplace violence, conflict resolution etc.
 - Physical security measures that will be put in place to protect workers
 - Methods to protect workers in the field (cell phones, team visits etc.)
 - Medical management for workers who are assaulted on the job
 - Reporting and investigation procedures for workers who are threatened and/or physically assaulted

On the state level:

AFT Public Employees believes that states and other public employers should have comprehensive workplace violence prevention policies and programs. AFT state affiliates are working on getting these legislated or administratively enacted. Washington State has developed a model program that is available from the AFT Health and Safety Program.

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On the Federal level:

AFT worked with other unions to get the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to develop Workplace Violence Prevention Guidelines. Our next step is to fight for an OSHA standard to mandate that all covered employers institute a violence prevention program.

A workplace where people fear attack and abuse is not a healthful or a safe place. States and other public employers must recognize that it is their legal duty to protect workers from violence just as much as any other health and safety hazard. Violent attacks are not something that “just happen”, but acts that can be controlled and prevented. Our members’ involvement in every step of the process is essential if we are to end this threat.

For more information about workplace violence prevention programs, call your AFT Public Employees local or the AFT Health and Safety Program at 800-238-1133 extension 5674

Assault on the Job Survey

How Safe is your Work Environment?

Does your agency.....

1. Place a high priority on eliminating hazards associated with assault on the job?
 Yes No
2. Have a policy that places employee safety on the same level of importance as client safety?
 Yes No
2. Investigate and document all instances of assault and/or harassment?
 Yes No
3. Have a written policy concerning assault on the job?
 Yes No
4. Involve employees in developing the policy?
 Yes No
5. Have a program to provide support for victims of assault?
 Yes No
6. Provide legal counsel for assault victims?
 Yes No
7. Encourage reporting assault incidents to the police and support prosecution of offenders?
 Yes No

Staffing

1. Is staffing adequate?
 Yes No
2. Does your agency make sure that you don't work alone?
 Yes No
3. Is there an adequate number of security staff?
 Yes No
4. Is back-up staff always available?
 Yes No

Workplace design

1. Are all work areas well lit?
 Yes No
2. Are private washrooms provided for the staff?
 Yes No
3. Is access to office areas/employees' work stations restricted to only authorized staff and clients?
 Yes No
4. Are there electronic alarm systems, closed-circuit TV or two way radios?
 Yes No
5. Is furniture well placed so employees can't get trapped in a room with a client?
 Yes No

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6. Are employees who do field work provided with personal alarm systems, beeper and/or cell phones?

- Yes No

7. Are parking lots, garages and other areas that employees walk through, secure and well-lit?

- Yes No

Training

1. Do all employees receive adequate training on how to protect themselves from being assaulted on the job?

- Yes No

2. Were employees involved in the development of the training program?

- Yes No

3. Do all new staff receive training upon hire?

- Yes No

Have you or any of your co-workers been physically assaulted at work or in the field?

- Yes No

Have you or any of your co-workers received threats or verbal abuse on the job?

- Yes No

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey.

Name _____

Job Title _____

Work Location _____

Work Phone _____

Home Phone _____