

Workplace Violence Prevention and Preparedness Strategies for Nonprofits



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This article contains information about prevention and preparedness strategies for workplace violence, including physical assaults and mass shootings.

When was the last time tempers got heated at your nonprofit?

Did two or more employees clash? Did people receiving services argue with each other? Maybe someone receiving services disagreed with a team member. Or maybe the conflict arose between an employee and a third party, like an angry family member or spouse.

Hopefully, the people in conflict resolved the incident peacefully, and learned some strategies for how to handle future conflicts at work.

But as nonprofit leaders, we can't just hope to avoid workplace violence at our nonprofit. In a world full of conflict and trauma, every nonprofit faces the specter of workplace violence, but many organizations are unprepared. [A 2019 study by the Society for Human Resource Management](#) found that more than 50 percent of HR professionals didn't know if their organization had a workplace violence program.

As nonprofit leaders, we must understand the risks, work to prevent violence if possible, and have a plan to respond if prevention efforts fail. In this article, we'll share information about common types of incidents; workplace violence risk factors; prevention strategies for nonprofits; how to create an incident plan; and additional resources for help.

Understanding Workplace Violence

In 2020, there were 392 workplace homicides, [according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(BLS\)](#). A joint study on workplace violence found that workplace homicides [declined by a total of 58%](#) between 1992 and 2019.

However, the study by the BLS, Bureau of Justice Statistics, and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health noted that [workplace homicides rose 11%](#) in the final six years of the study period. Homicide comprised about 20 percent of all workplace fatalities for women in 2019, compared to 7.5 percent of workplace

fatalities for men.

On average, workplaces experienced more than 1 million nonfatal violent victimizations annually between 2015 and 2019, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey. That includes rape or sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault. The number equates to eight nonfatal violent crimes for every 1,000 workers age 16 and older.

Workplaces are the most common site of mass shootings, according to The Violence Prevention Project Research Center, a nonprofit that seeks to reduce violence through research.

Workplace violence can have lasting consequences for both individual survivors and the organization. Individual survivors face physical issues that can range from injury, temporary or permanent disability, and increased risk of health issues like hypertension, all the way to death, [the National Safety Council reports](#). Survivors may experience psychological consequences like PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), sleep disturbances, sadness, fear, and anxiety. They may face financial consequences such as medical costs, lost wages, and running out of sick leave or PTO benefits. And they may experience social consequences, like troubled relationships with friends and loved ones, withdrawal, and an increase in interpersonal conflict.

For a nonprofit, workplace violence can result in employees leaving the organization; absenteeism, tardiness, and sick leave; and reduced ability to provide services. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health estimates the annual economic cost of workplace violence at \$121 billion.

Recognize Potential Warning Signs

Sometimes a person with a direct relationship to the workplace, like a current or former employee, commits an act of violence. In other cases, the perpetrator has a relationship with the victim that spills over into the workplace, like an act of domestic violence against an employee. And in some cases, the perpetrator has a secondary relationship to the workplace, like a customer or client. Another possibility is an act of violence that is truly random, but happens in a workplace.

The National Safety Council cites these warning signs that someone could be moving toward violence:

- Direct and indirect threats
- A history of violence or criminal behavior
- Verbal abuse
- Erratic or menacing behavior
- Being uncooperative with peers
- Preoccupation with weapons
- Offensive comments or jokes about violence
- Drug and alcohol abuse

Job-related warning signs can include disregard for health and safety, frequent and unexplained absences or tardiness, difficulty concentrating, inconsistent work performance and attitude, excessive need for oversight and supervision, deteriorating work performance, and poor health and hygiene.

Of course, it's important to remember that workplace performance and behavioral issues can surface when an employee is just going through a hard time. If you see any of these signs from an employee, check in with them and ask what they need. Keep in mind that the best course of action may be to remind the employee about the availability of support from an Employee Assistance Program or community resources. Speak to the lead HR professional at your nonprofit if you feel you need to share your concern about the employee with someone else—or speak to another member of your management team if your nonprofit doesn't have HR.

It's also important to remember that, while violence often follows a progression, it's not always linear. Every person and every situation is unique. Risk factors for violence should never be ignored.

Create a Workplace Violence Prevention Plan

A strong workplace violence prevention plan can make employees feel safer and encourage them to report risk factors for violence. Violence prevention plans can also lead to higher morale, lower insurance costs, and a stronger organizational safety culture, according to the National Safety Council. If you work for a large nonprofit,

consider asking for volunteers for a task force to create your plan. Seek input early on from all team members, with an emphasis on those who do your organization's highest-risk jobs.

Many states require some types of workplaces to have violence prevention plans. [The Workplace Violence Prevention for Health Care and Social Service Workers Act](#), currently before Congress, would require the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to create a standard that requires health care and social service employers to create and implement workplace violence prevention plans.

According to the National Safety Council, factors that can make it more likely that a workplace will experience violence include:

Environmental

- Lack of natural surveillance (providing client services in isolated rooms, etc.)
- Obstructed entry or exit routes
- Poor lighting in areas like corridors or parking lots
- Unstable political or social environment
- High crime rates in an area
- Working in or near establishments that serve alcohol

Organizational

- Acceptance of workplace violence as "part of the job" and/or fear of retaliation
- Chronic disputes between management and employees
- Frequent grievances filed by employees; perceptions of injustice, unfairness, or double standards
- Chronic dangerous work conditions
- Frequent injury claims, especially for psychological or occupational stress
- Understaffing and/or excessive demand for overtime
- Low employee engagement results, including HR grievances, stressors, or high conflict

Occupational

- Prolonged or irregular shift work
- Working alone, in isolated locations or a patient or client's home
- Public-facing work, especially in service professions
- Working with people who display volatile or unstable behavior
- Working with people with a history of violence or drug and alcohol abuse
- Working in community-based settings, such as rehabilitation centers and group homes
- Handling cash and valuables
- Working where alcohol is served
- Delivery of passengers, goods, or services

Assess your workplace for these risk factors and create a plan to mitigate the most significant risks you find. This could mean taking action to make the physical space at your nonprofit safer, like adding lighting, removing obstructions of sight lines, installing panic buttons, holding client meetings in areas within sight and sound of other staff, and clearly marking entrances and exits. Get employee input on the changes you plan to make, and ask what else you could do to make employees feel safer at work. Follow up on all suggestions to let employees know what you changed, what you didn't, and why.

Training can also help lessen the likelihood of workplace violence and prepare you if it happens. All employees should receive training about workplace violence issues at orientation, along with annual refreshers. Training should describe the types of workplace violence, emphasize the role that all employees play in raising concerns about violence, provide information about de-escalation strategies and how to respond in an emergency, and let employees know how to report workplace violence. (For more on de-escalation, see our article in this issue.) Workplace violence incidents often happen quickly and end before law enforcement arrives, so training should help employees develop skills and awareness they'd need to survive in a fast-moving situation, [according to the FBI](#). Managers and supervisors should receive additional training on how to recognize and respond to the potential signs of workplace violence.

If an employee faces stalking or threats from someone inside or outside the workplace, ask the employee what kind of support they need from your team, and give them as much of what they ask for as you can. This trauma-

informed practice empowers an employee who faces a scary situation where they have little control. And if the employee knows the perpetrator, the employee can provide helpful information on how to protect themselves and the workplace, [according to Workplaces Respond to Domestic and Sexual Violence](#), a national coalition.

One of the most important things employers can do to reduce the threat of workplace violence is to foster a culture anchored in psychological safety. If employees feel they can speak up about worries and concerns without retribution, they'll be more likely to help you identify risk factors for workplace violence, and more willing to report things that seem or feel concerning, so you can address them before an incident happens.

Some key steps to cultivate psychological safety:

Lead with trust. Leaders must demonstrate that they trust their employees and their peers to be trusted in return. This will take time, patience, and consistency. Leaders should spell out that they allow and even welcome honest mistakes and feedback about concerns, and there won't be consequences. Then they must demonstrate that, time and again.

Treat disagreement as a gift. The more perspectives a team can gather, including reasons why an exciting idea might raise safety concerns, the more valuable insight they will have and the better prepared you will be if an incident occurs. Welcome and invite disagreement on your team.

Make talking about mistakes comfortable. Sometimes we all fail, including teams. Set the expectation that some experiments will fail, that failure is part of growth, and that it won't involve punishment. Leaders must share their own mistakes and failures to show that it's ok to do so.

Don't give up. It takes time, effort, and consistency to cultivate psychological safety. You and your team will likely slip into old patterns over and over. When you see that happen, name it, and give yourselves and your team members grace. Remind yourself and each other why you're doing this work, what progress you've made, and how the journey will benefit your team and the people and communities your nonprofit serves.

How to Respond to Workplace Violence

If workplace violence takes place at your nonprofit, leaders should follow the organization's emergency and evacuation plans, as well as your guidelines on when to call 911. Follow all organizational procedures on reporting and investigating the incident.

Immediately after an incident, your nonprofit should:

- Make sure all employees and clients are safe and accounted for.
- Provide first aid or get medical attention for anyone who needs it.
- Inform employees about what happened and what actions they need to take.
- Immediately make counseling services available at no charge to employees for an extended period.
- Assess and arrange for longer-term support for employees as needed. This might include additional counseling, medical care, financial or legal assistance, and extra time off.
- Communicate clear expectations to your team members. Every step you take to clearly communicate what work must get done during this time and what can wait will make people feel more comfortable.
- Create return-to-work plans with employees who need time away from the office to recover. Stay in touch with thoughtful cards, occasional check-ins, and visits as the employee feels comfortable. You want to show care and concern, not create pressure. As the employee's return approaches, consider any job modifications they may need to come back to work.
- Depending on the severity of the incident, your team may need more help to process what happened, like a conversation led by a mental health professional, or a memorial service for a co-worker who died.
- Reach out to the family members of employees who were severely injured or killed to show your support.
- Follow your crisis management plan to communicate with outside parties, like the public, donors, and clients, as needed.

Studies have found that social support in the days, weeks, and months following workplace violence can make it less likely that affected employees will experience depression. Social support can include expressing care and concern, providing concrete support like time off and flexibility in work hours and location, and listening when employees share their experiences.

Whether you also witnessed the incident or not, it can be emotionally challenging to support your team after workplace violence. You might be tempted to stop talking about what happened as soon as possible. But the consequences of violence can stay with teams for a long time, and all of you will be better equipped to heal if you acknowledge what you're feeling.

Start with yourself. Write down what you feel, whether it's sadness, anger, frustration, all of the above, or something else. Get enough sleep and nourishing food, so your body has time and sustenance to process emotions. Name what you're feeling with your team. This helps show them that it's OK to feel a range of emotions after what happened.

If a team member shares something they are struggling with:

Listen.

Ask what support they need.

If they don't know, offer a few options and see how they respond. You may need to agree to revisit the topic later.

Do say: "I'm sorry you're going through a hard time."

"I'm here to support you."

Don't say: "I know exactly what you're going through because...[personal story here.]" No two experiences are the same—even if both of you were in the room when the violent act happened. If someone shares something with you, don't make it about you.

Strengthen Your Team Through Prevention

A thoughtful workplace violence prevention plan can help prevent many turbulent situations from escalating into violence, and provide straightforward 'what to do' guidance that many team members will appreciate. Careful attention to workplace violence prevention can also help employees feel more secure at work and strengthen a team.

Violence can happen even in a workplace that has taken measures to prevent it. But if it does, your team can rely on the work you've done to prepare—and turn your attention to healing.

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Reach her with questions and ideas about how nonprofits can prevent and respond to workplace violence at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or 505.456.4045.

Violence Prevention Resources

These resources can help your nonprofit work to prevent violence and respond if it occurs.

[Incident Prevention and Response Strategies – Workplaces Respond to Domestic and Sexual Violence](#)

[National Domestic Violence Hotline – 1-800-799-SAFE](#)

[Preventing and Responding to Workplace Violence – Chubb](#)