

## Program Development

### Overview

There are many different approaches agencies can take in developing plans to prevent workplace violence. An approach that works well in one agency may not be suitable for another. This section outlines some broad guidelines that can help agencies in:

- ◆ Analyzing their current ability to handle potentially violent situations,
- ◆ Filling in any skills gaps that exist,
- ◆ Developing a procedure for employees to report incidents, and
- ◆ Developing response plans.

### Forming a Planning Group

Successful agency programs usually start by forming a planning group. The planning group evaluates the agency's current ability to handle violent incidents and recommends ways to strengthen its response capability.

Typically, members of a planning group include representatives from management, Employee Relations, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Law Enforcement, and Security. Organizations that are too small to have a law enforcement/security component often have a representative of the Federal Protective Service (when they have jurisdiction) or the local police on their planning group. Depending on the size and structure of the agency, membership may also include representatives from Safety, Health Unit, Medical Department, Office of Equal Employment Opportunity, Public Affairs, and other appropriate offices.

Participation on the planning group should **always** be offered to the Office of the General Counsel and the Office of Inspector General. When these offices are not represented on the planning group, they usually act as consultants to it.

While many offices may be represented on the planning group, only a few of them will generally be involved in responding to reported incidents. For example, representatives from Employee

## **Forming a Planning Group (continued)**

Relations, EAP, and Security often make up the incident response team. Typically, representatives from the other offices will not be involved in responding directly to incidents, but they will act as consultants to the incident response team or play an active role only in certain types of situations.

## **Working with Your Union**

An agency should involve the union early on in the process of planning workplace violence programs. Unions are the elected representatives of bargaining unit employees and are legally entitled to negotiate over many conditions of employment of those employees. Although some of the substantive issues relating to workplace violence, including issues concerning internal security, may be outside the duty to bargain, this does not mean that consultation and discussion with the union cannot occur.

Union involvement is particularly appropriate where there are labor-management partnership councils. It is a good practice to involve recognized unions up-front, before decisions are made, so that they can have an opportunity both to express employees' concerns and to bring to bear their expertise and knowledge. For example, the union may be aware of employees in the agency who have special skills in conflict resolution or crisis counseling. The union may also be helpful in identifying training needs of employees with regard to workplace violence prevention. Union involvement demonstrates both the agency's and union's commitment to the success of a workplace violence program.

## **Steps in the Planning Process**

### *#1. Analyze agency's current ability to handle potentially violent situations*

Conducting an analysis of the agency's current ability to handle potentially violent situations is a necessary effort. Looking at previous incidents that have occurred at your agency and evaluating how effectively they were handled is a good way to start. Attention should be given to identifying patterns of risk and potential prevention strategies, for example, where a particular workgroup is having a number of complaints in a given period of time.

Also, reviewing the case studies in Part II of this handbook and analyzing how they were handled in other agencies can help planning groups determine if their own agency would be prepared to handle similar incidents.

## Steps in the Planning Process (continued)

**Staff expertise.** Because of their different missions, agencies have different areas of staff expertise. Some organizations have strong law enforcement capabilities, some have an in-house medical staff, some have in-house Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselors, and some have criminal investigators. Agencies may have employees who have special skills that could be put to good use in a potentially violent situation, such as employees who are skilled in mediation, conflict resolution, crisis counseling, investigations, or threat assessment. Identifying offices and individuals ahead of time, working with them in the planning stages, and agreeing on a coordinated response effort is one of the most effective ways of preparing an agency to handle potentially violent situations should they arise.

**Level of security and jurisdictional issues.** An important part of the analysis is to examine the current level of security at your agency. Follow the advice of your security office or, if you are in a building without a security staff, contact the General Services Administration's Federal Protective Service (when they have jurisdiction) or local law enforcement about recommended basic security measures.

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Work out in advance all jurisdictional issues among the various security and law enforcement entities that may be involved should an emergency occur. There have been cases where an employee has called 911 and critical moments were lost because the Federal Protective Service or in-house law enforcement were the ones with jurisdiction, rather than the local police. In other cases, employees called their in-house security guards and time was lost while local police were being contacted because the security guards did not carry firearms.

## Steps in the Planning Process (continued)

### *#2. Fill the skills gaps*

Jurisdictional issues are sometimes complicated and must be worked out ahead of time. See Part III, Section 5 for further discussions of security issues and considerations.

Skills deficiencies exist even in large agencies with numerous resources at hand. In some organizations training is needed. (See page 18 for a discussion of training.) However, crisis situations occur infrequently and it is often not practical to maintain in-house expertise for every aspect of the agency's response plan.

If this is the case, suggested sources of outside assistance include:

◆ **Other government agencies.** Get to know specialists in other government agencies. Federal agencies often share expertise, especially when crisis situations occur. They are also an invaluable source for learning about new training materials and effective training approaches.

◆ **Local Police.** If you do not have in-house law enforcement, or are not in a building served by the Federal Protective Service, get to know your local police officers. Invite them in to work with your planning group. They can recommend security measures. They can tell you about jurisdiction and what they would do if you called them during an incident. They can teach employees personal safety techniques and how to avoid becoming a victim.

◆ **Other community resources.** Locate and work with resources in your community. For example, if you don't have immediate access to emergency mental health consultation, you can work with your local community mental health department, "hotline" staff, hospital, or emergency crisis center. A nearby university may have faculty who are willing to be consulted.

### *#3. Develop a procedure for employees to report incidents*

The primary consideration in developing a reporting procedure is to make sure that it encourages employees to report all incidents, even minor ones. Some agencies use hotlines. Some arrange for a member of the team to take the calls, usually a specialist from Employee Relations or Security. Other agencies require employees to report incidents to their supervisor (or to any agency supervisor), who in turn reports these incidents to Employee Relations or Security.

Credibility for any reporting system will be dependent upon whether reports are handled quickly and effectively. Word

## Steps in the Planning Process (continued)

spreads quickly among employees when a report is made and nothing is done, when a report is handled improperly, or when the allegations are not treated confidentially. Therefore, before a reporting procedure is announced to employees, ensure that the agency staff who will be responding to reported incidents are trained and able to handle any reported incidents.

Take threats seriously. Employees may not step forward with their concerns if they think that management will minimize these concerns.

Also important to the success of any reporting system is management's encouragement for reporting incidents. Agency managers must create an environment that shows that management will always respond to reports of incidents and to employee concerns.

Incident reports should be reviewed on a periodic basis to provide feedback on the effectiveness of existing intervention strategies and prevention efforts.

### *#4. Develop plans to respond to workplace violence incidents*

Given the wide range of incidents and situations that can occur at the worksite (from disruptive behavior to shootings) and, within that range, the wide variation in threatening and disruptive behaviors, it is difficult for agencies to define specifically the responsibilities of the different offices that would be involved in responding to an incident under a workplace violence program. Agencies have found it useful to classify incidents in broad categories, for example, emergency/non-emergency, or emergency/threats/bullying/disruptive behavior, or coworker/outsider.

Using these broad categories, agencies can determine which offices will generally respond to each type of incident and what role each office would play in the response effort. Agencies can plan for both immediate responses and long-term responses, when appropriate. For example, in the case of a suicide threat, the plan may state that the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor determines whether further action is necessary. If the suicide threat seems imminent, the plan may state that the community's emergency services (or local police) are contacted. The plan would also state what management would do if the EAP counselor were not immediately available.

## Steps in the Planning Process (continued)

To facilitate developing a plan that works for your agency, a series of case studies are provided in Part II of this handbook. There you will find examples of the plans that were in place to handle a number of situations.

It will become apparent from reviewing these examples that plans for a coordinated response to reported incidents must be kept flexible. Responsibility for overall coordination and direction is usually assigned to one individual or one office. The coordinator must have the flexibility to use the plan as a guideline, not a mandatory set of procedures. More important, the coordinator must have the flexibility to tailor the recommended response to the particular situation. It is important to recognize that threatening situations often require creative responses. Given this, the importance of flexibility cannot be overemphasized.

You can't always prevent violence because violent incidents are sometimes unpredictable, but you can reduce the risk by planning ahead and being prepared to act swiftly to deal with threats, intimidation, and other disruptive behavior at an early stage.

The case studies in Part II highlight the need for backup plans in situations calling for an immediate response where the individual responsible for a certain aspect of the response effort has gone home for the day, is on vacation, or is out of the building at a meeting. Taking a team approach in responding to a potentially violent situation is an ideal way to provide backup coverage. A team approach ensures that all staff in Employee Relations, the Employee Assistance Program, Security, and other offices are thoroughly trained and prepared to work together with management to deal with potentially violent situations. It ensures coverage, regardless of which staffer in each of the offices is on duty when the incident occurs.