

Employee Assistance Program Considerations

Introduction

Employee Assistance Program (EAP) participation can be important to the success of an agency's workplace violence program. The EAP's role generally begins with participation on the agency planning group where decisions are made about the role the EAP will play in the workplace violence program. EAPs usually play an active role in early prevention efforts, sometimes participate on the incident response team, and generally assist with organizational recovery after an incident of workplace violence has occurred. This section will provide an overview of the EAP and then discuss considerations specific to workplace violence.

Overview of the Employee Assistance Program

Every Federal agency has an EAP which provides short-term counseling and referral services to its employees at no cost. These programs are staffed by professional counselors who are available to discuss problems that can adversely affect job performance, conduct, and reliability. EAPs are required to help employees deal with alcoholism or drug abuse problems and most programs also help employees with other problems such as marital or financial problems. EAP counselors often refer employees to other professional services and resources within the community for further information, assistance, or long-term counseling.

EAPs differ from agency to agency in their structure and scope of services. Some are in-house programs, staffed by employees of the agency. Others are contracted out or are operated through an interagency agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) Division of Federal Occupational Health. Among contracted programs, services differ, depending on the terms of the contract and the relationship between the agency and the contractor.

Confidentiality is an important issue for EAPs. Employees who seek EAP services are afforded considerable privacy by laws,

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policies, and the professional ethics of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) professionals. It is common practice for EAPs to inform employees in writing about the limits of confidentiality on their first visit.

Agency planning group members should familiarize themselves with the structure, scope, and special considerations of their agency's own EAP. As the planning group explores the range of services provided, it may identify needs for expanding the program's existing array of services. EAP professionals should advise the agency planning group on the relevant laws, policies, and professional ethical constraints under which they operate, including the Privacy Act provisions of 5 USC 552a and the DHHS Alcohol and Drug Patient Confidentiality Regulation provisions of 42 CFR Part 2. This will allow cooperative arrangements to be worked out for an appropriate EAP role.

The Employee Assistance Program's Role in Dealing with Workplace Violence

Role in early prevention efforts

EAP staff members generally assist in policy and strategy development and help determine the EAP's role on the agency's workplace violence incident response team. EAPs bring a special expertise to the planning process. They are in an optimal position to assist with many of the activities conducted by the planning group.

- ◆ **Promotion of the EAP.** The effectiveness of a workplace violence program is greatly enhanced in an organization with an active, well-known EAP presence. Agencies with active programs promote the EAP by issuing periodic statements from top management endorsing the program and reminding employees of the services offered by the EAP, having counselors attend staff meetings to familiarize agency employees with the counselors, and having counselors give special briefings and seminars for managers, employees, and union stewards.
- ◆ **Information dissemination.** EAPs often provide booklets, pamphlets, and lending libraries of books and videos about such topics as domestic violence, stress reduction, and dealing with angry customers.

The Employee Assistance Program's Role in Dealing with Workplace Violence (continued)

- ◆ **Early involvement in organizational change.** When an agency is facing reorganization, restructuring, or other organizational change which may have a negative effect on employees, the Employee Assistance Program can help to, through individual or group sessions, keep information flowing, keep feelings under control, prevent potential outbursts, provide constructive outlets for feelings, and help employees plan for the future.
- ◆ **Employee and supervisory training.** Much of the employee training described in Part I, Section 3 is conducted by EAP staff. For example, counselors can train employees on such topics as dealing with angry coworkers and customers, conflict resolution, and communications skills. Since EAP staff understand how important it is that supervisors (and coworkers) not diagnose an employee's problem, they are in an excellent position to explain the delicate balance between identifying problem behavior early on and labeling an individual as potentially violent. EAP counselors can train supervisors to deal with problems as soon as they surface without diagnosing the employee's problem.

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Participation on an incident response team

Since every reported incident of workplace violence is different, and every agency is structured differently, EAP participation on an incident response team will depend on many factors. Issues need to be clarified ahead of time to avoid misunderstanding and conflict. Team members need to understand that if a case is being discussed and the counselor says, *Sorry, I can't help you with this one*, they should neither expect an explanation nor assume that the

The Employee Assistance Program's Role in Dealing with Workplace Violence (continued)

counselor is being uncooperative. Advance planning can help to identify ways of coping with these types of issues. For example, if the EAP is large enough, different staff members may play different roles. Or the staff may be able to identify other professionals who can be brought in to ensure that all needs are addressed. Working with other members of planning group and the incident response team in advance can clarify the EAP's role when an incident arises.

Consultation with supervisor when incident is reported.

Depending on the type of incident reported, it is often important for a counselor, along with an employee relations specialist and security officer, to be part of the incident response team that consults with the manager. In some situations, such as potential suicides, the EAP can play a major role. In other situations, such as dealing with an employee who frightens coworkers, but who has not actually done or said anything warranting discipline, the EAP can assist other team members in working with the supervisor to plan an effective response.

Response/Intervention. The counselor can help with conflict resolution in situations that are reported early enough for such an intervention. The counselor can work with the victim, giving advice and guidance, or with the perpetrator, helping to diffuse the anger/hostility that could lead to violence. The counselor can help clarify options and procedures for situations in which substance abuse or mental illness seems to be a factor. For example, states differ in their laws regarding civil commitment for psychiatric treatment. The counselor can explain to other team members the EAP role in such a situation, and can coordinate with other community resources to develop contingency plans for various emergency situations. These and other examples are illustrated in the case studies in Part II.

Follow-up to a violent incident

Many EAPs are prepared to respond promptly to a variety of needs that may exist after a violent incident. Prompt individual interventions with employees who have had particularly stressful experiences are sometimes necessary. Debriefing sessions for groups are often conducted two or three days after the incident. The EAP can also act as consultants to management in helping the organization to recover.

The Employee Assistance Program's Role in Dealing with Workplace Violence (continued)

Individual interventions. Though most employees will need only brief intervention, provision should be made for the few who may need longer-term professional assistance. Strategies for identifying these employees and guiding them as smoothly as possible from emergency-centered interventions to more extensive mental health care should be included in the planning.

The EAP may approach these responsibilities in different ways, depending on the size and experience of its staff. In some cases, internal EAP resources may be sufficient, but in others, additional staffing will be necessary. EAP staff who do not have expertise in traumatic incident counseling may wish to develop in-house expertise or keep close at hand the phone numbers of resources to contact should an incident occur. Potential sources of additional help, for example, private contractors, community mental health resources, university or medical school programs, might be explored.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISD). Many EAPs have been trained to participate on CISD teams. See discussion of the CISD process on page 136.

Acting as consultants to management. Since management bears the brunt of responsibility after a violent incident, and can find itself dealing with unfamiliar challenges under high stress, the EAP can be very helpful in facilitating an optimal response. It can provide managers with information on traumatic events and can assist them in analyzing the situation and developing strategies for the organization's recovery. An effective EAP needs to be familiar not only with post-disaster mental health care, but also with management practices that facilitate recovery and with other resources which may need to be mobilized.

In thinking about an organization's recovery, there is a temptation to focus narrowly on care-giving responses such as debriefings and counseling discussed above. Essential as these services are, they are only part of the picture. The way the manager conveys information, schedules responsibilities, sets priorities, and monitors employee performance after a violent incident can play a vital role in helping or hindering recovery. Some EAPs are trained to provide this type of consultation. Agencies will find *A Manager's Handbook: Handling Traumatic Events* helpful in this regard. (See Part III, Section 6 for further information on organizational recovery and page 145 for information on obtaining a copy of the *Manager's Handbook*.)

Other EAP Considerations for the Agency Planning Group

Should the EAP take the incident report?

Most agencies do not use the EAP as the office responsible for taking incident reports on workplace violence. Agencies give the following reasons: Because confidentiality requirements prohibit EAP counselors from disclosing information, putting a counselor in the position of informing the other members of the intervention team about the report could lead to serious misunderstandings among agency employees and harm the credibility of the EAP. It sometimes takes years to build the EAP into a viable program trusted by employees to keep any contacts confidential and the dual role could diminish this viability.

In addition, the incident reports could get confused with EAP records covered by the agency's internal system of records for its EAP under the Privacy Act. Records that are filed and retrieved by name or other personal identifier are subject to the Privacy Act provisions of 5 USC 552a. Since each agency's system of records is different, it is a good idea to check with the agency's Privacy Act Officer regarding the systems notice for the agency's Employee Assistance Program. The systems notice covers who can gain access to the records and how amendments are made to the records.

Many times the EAP counselor will be the person who first hears about an incident involving threatening behavior, even though the agency's reporting system provides for another office to take incident reports. Managers and employees often feel comfortable telling the counselor about a situation that frightens them. The agency's planning group should decide ahead of time which types of reports the counselors should handle alone and which types should be reported to the other team members, always making sure that each member of the team understands the confidentiality requirements of the EAP.

Should the EAP be first intervenor?

Agencies who have had experience with the EAP being the first intervenor in workplace violence situations report that they do not recommend this approach for the following reasons:

Other EAP Considerations for the Agency Planning Group (continued)

- (1) Issues of confidentiality cause numerous conflicts for the counselors, and
- (2) It could lead to a perception of treating perpetrators of workplace violence as victims needing counseling rather than as perpetrators needing discipline.

Therefore, the agency planning group should ensure that procedures developed ahead of time allow for flexibility and do not require counselors to be the first intervenors in situations where this would be inappropriate.

Should the EAP perform psychological exams?

Organizations with experience in **offering** psychological or psychiatric examinations usually recommend that these not be performed by the EAP staff. The process of conducting these examinations is not only time-consuming and highly specialized, but it also fits poorly with other EAP responsibilities. Thus, most agencies find it preferable, if offering such an examination, to have it done by an “outsider” such as an external contractor. Some agencies have professional mental health staffs in addition to the EAP and utilize them for this type of evaluation. The EAP can then take the role of teacher and facilitator, helping everyone involved to understand the report of the examination and put its recommendations into practice.

Case Studies 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 12, 14, and 16 provide practical examples of some of the issues discussed in this section.
