VIOLENCE IN THE SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITY WORKPLACE

Part One: Developing a Corporate Prevention Program

Typically thought of as "safe" places, senior living communities are increasingly facing a significant increase in acts of aggression from personnel, residents, family members and visitors. Consider the following examples:

- Everyone at the assisted living complex in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. thought 72-year-old Felix Freed had found a best friend in his 90-year old neighbor, as the two were seen inseparably together at meals, during walks and sharing conversations throughout the complex; until one Thursday morning, when Freed pulled a plastic bag over his best friend's head and suffocated her.

- In Calif., a man facing eviction from a low-income senior citizens complex shot and killed the building's two managers and a tenant, then turned the gun on himself.

- In a rural Midwest nursing home, police surmised that it appeared that a 92-year-old resident was the target of a murder attempt when an imposter posing as a blood technician set his room on fire.

- Also in the Midwest, two nursing home administrators were gunned down as they left work, and police arrested a fired nursing assistant described by co-workers as mentally unstable.

In 2001, the Bureau of Labor Statistics released data showing nursing and personal care facilities had more than double the number of non-fatal assaults and violent acts than other health services overall and had twelve times more incidents than the private sector. Unfortunately, the incidents of violence in nursing and personal care facilities were likely underreported, due in part to the perception within the industry that assaults are "part of the job." And indeed, as senior living communities accept more residents with dementia, psychiatric disorders and other conditions often associated with challenging behaviors, the number of residents that attack other residents and staff is increasing.

Workplace violence ranges from offensive or threatening language to homicide. In this first of a two part series, we'll discuss developing corporate workplace violence prevention program guidelines, including policy recommendations and practical corrective methods to help prevent and mitigate the effects of workplace violence. The second part will deal more specifically with training tips for dealing with a violent individual (e.g., resident, employee, family member, or visitor), including how to respond to gunfire in the workplace.

Despite an increased in incidents of violence in nursing and personal care facilities, experts estimate that 80 percent of health care organizations have not established formal workplace violence prevention programs. To address this problem, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) developed the "Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Health Care & Social Service Workers" at http://www.osha.gov/Publications/osha3148.pdf. In their guidelines, OSHA offers the following recommendations.

MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT AND EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

Management commitment and employee involvement are complementary and essential elements of an effective safety and health program. Management commitment, including the endorsement and visible involvement of top management, provides the motivation and resources to deal effectively with workplace violence, and should include:

- Demonstrated organizational concern for employee emotional and physical safety and health.
- Assigned responsibility for the various aspects of the workplace violence prevention program to ensure all managers, supervisors, and employees understand their obligation.
- Appropriate allocation of authority and resources to all responsible parties.
- A system of accountability for involved managers, supervisors and employees.
- A comprehensive employee assistance program of medical and psychological counseling and debriefing for employees experiencing or witnessing assaults and other violent incidents.
- Commitment to support and implement appropriate recommendations from safety and health committee.

Likewise, employee involvement should include:

- Understanding and complying with the workplace violence prevention program and other safety and security measures.

- Prompt and accurate reporting of violent incidents.

- Participation on safety and health committees or teams that receive reports of violent incidents or security problems, provides scheduled and random facility inspections, and responds with recommendations for corrective strategies.

- Taking part in a continuing education program that covers techniques to recognize escalating agitation, assaultive behavior, or criminal intent, and discusses appropriate responses.

WRITTEN PROGRAM

Develop a written program for job safety and security with clear goals and objectives to prevent workplace violence that is incorporated into the organizations overall safety and health program. The workplace violence prevention program should:

- Create and disseminate a clear policy of zero tolerance for workplace violence, verbal and nonverbal threats and related actions. Ensure managers, supervisors, coworkers, clients, residents and visitors know about this policy.

- Ensure no employee who reports or experiences workplace violence faces reprisals.

- Encourage employees to promptly report incidents and suggest ways to reduce or eliminate risks. Require records of incidents to assess risk and measure progress.

- Outline a comprehensive plan for maintaining security in the workplace. This includes establishing a liaison with law enforcement representatives and others who can help identify ways to prevent and mitigate workplace violence.

- Assign responsibility and authority for the program to individuals or teams with appropriate training and skills and ensure that adequate resources to develop expertise are available.

- Affirm management commitment to a worker-supportive environment that places as much importance on employee safety and health as on serving the resident.

- Set up a company briefing as part of the initial effort to address such issues as preserving safety, supporting afflicted employees and facilitating recovery.

WORKSITE ANALYSIS

Worksite analysis involves a step-by-step, commonsense look at the workplace to find existing or potential hazards for workplace violence. This entails reviewing specific procedures or operations that contribute to hazards and specific locales where hazards may develop. When assembling the team to carry out these tasks, consider representatives from senior management, operations, employee assistance, security, occupational safety and health, legal and human resources staff. Assign responsibilities according to needs. The recommended program for a worksite analysis includes, but is not limited to:

- **Records analysis and tracking** – This activity should include reviewing safety records, charts, incident reports and logs addressing near-incidents of assaultive behaviors to identify trends in assaults relative to particular:

    o   Departments;

    o   Units;

    o   Job titles;

    o   Unit activities;

    o   Workstations; and

    o   Time of day

Tabulate these data to target the frequency and severity of incidents to establish a baseline for measuring improvement. Monitor trends and analyze incidents of actual or potential workplace violence.

- **Screening employee surveys** – An important screening tool is an employee questionnaire or survey to get employees' ideas on the potential for violent incidents and to identify or confirm the need for improved security measures. Detailed baseline screening surveys can help pinpoint tasks that put employees at risk. Periodic surveys – conducted at least annually or whenever operations change or incidents of workplace violence occur – help identify new or previously unnoticed risk factors and deficiencies or

failures in work practices, procedures or controls. Also, the surveys help assess the effects of changes in the work processes. The periodic review process should also include feed-back and follow-up. Consider using independent reviewers, such as safety and health professionals or insurance consultants to offer advice to strengthen programs.

- **Conducting a workplace security analysis** – The team or coordinator should periodically inspect the workplace and evaluate tasks to identify hazards, conditions, operations and situations that could lead to violence. To find areas requiring further evaluation, the team or coordinator should:

    o Analyze incidents, including the characteristics of assailants and victims, an account of what happened before and during the incident, and the relevant details of the situation and its outcome.

    o Identify jobs or locations with the greatest risk of violence as well as processes and procedures that put employees at risk of assault, including how often and when.

    o Note high-risk factors such as types of residents (for example, those with dementia, psychiatric conditions or a history of alcohol or drug abuse); physical risk factors related to building layout or design; isolated locations and job activities; devices; areas of easy, unsecured access; and areas with previous security problems.

    o Evaluate the effectiveness of existing security measures, including engineering controls. Determine if risk factors have been reduced or eliminated and take appropriate action.

HAZARD PREVENTION AND CONTROL

After hazards are identified through the systematic worksite analysis, the next step is to design measures through engineering and administrative work practices to prevent or control these hazards. If violence does occur, post-incident response can be an important tool in preventing future incidents.

- **Engineering controls and workplace adaptations to minimize risk** –Involves removing the hazard from the workplace or creating a barrier between the worker and the hazard based on what was identified in the workplace security analysis. Examples include:

    o Install and regularly maintain alarm systems and other security devices.

    o Use a closed-circuit video recording for high-risk areas on a 24-hour basis.

    o Place curved mirrors at hallway intersections or concealed areas.

    o Lock all unused doors to limit access, in accordance with local fire codes.

    o Install bright, effective lighting, both indoors and outdoors.

- **Administrative and work practice controls to minimize risk** – Affect the way staff perform jobs or tasks. Examples include:

    o Require employees to report all assaults or threats to a supervisor or manager. Keep log books and reports of such incidents to help determine any necessary actions to prevent recurrences.

    o Advertise and encourage employees to seek counseling through employee assistance programs as needed.

    o Conduct exit interviews when employees retire, quit, transfer or are terminated to identify potential violence.

- o Institute a sign-in procedure for visitors. As needed, establish a list of "restricted visitors" for individuals with court ordered restraints or history of violence or threats, disgruntled former employees, etc. Make copies available at security checkpoints, nurses' stations, etc.

- o Provide staff with identification badges, preferably without last names, to readily verify employment.

- o Determine the behavioral history of new and transferred residents to learn about any past violent or assaultive behaviors and develop plans of care.

- o Encourage a "buddy system," especially when personal safety may be threatened.

- o Provide staff members with security escorts to parking areas in evening or late hours. Ensure that parking areas are highly visible, well lit and safely accessible to the building.

- o Advise staff to exercise extra care in elevators, stairwells and unfamiliar residences; leave the premises immediately if there is a hazardous situation; or request police escort if needed.

- o Develop policies and procedures covering home health care providers, such as contracts on how visits will be conducted, the presence of others in the home during the visits and the refusal to provide services in a clearly hazardous situation.

- **Employer responses to incidents of violence** – Workplace violence programs should provide comprehensive treatment for employees who are victimized personally or may be traumatized by witnessing a workplace violence incident. Injured staff should receive prompt treatment and psychological evaluation whenever an assault takes place, regardless of its severity. A strong follow-up program for employees will not only help them to deal with these problems but also help prepare them to confront or prevent future incidents of violence.

SAFETY AND HEALTH TRAINING

Employees should receive required violence prevention program training during orientation and annually thereafter. The training should cover topics such as:

- Workplace violence prevention program and related policies concerning illicit drugs and alcohol and possession of weapons so employees know exactly what is expected of them;

- Risk factors that cause or contribute to assaults;

- Early recognition of escalating behavior, warning signs or situations that may lead to assaults;

- Ways to prevent or diffuse volatile situations, aggressive behavior, manage anger and appropriately use medications as chemical restraints;

- A standard response action plan for violent situations, including the availability of assistance, response to alarm systems and communication procedures;

- Ways to deal with hostile people other than residents, such as relatives and visitors;

- Policies and procedures for reporting and recordkeeping; and

- Policies and procedures for obtaining medical care, counseling, worker's compensation or legal assistance after a violent episode or injury.

In addition, supervisors and managers need training to anticipate, recognize and respond to conflict and potential violence in the workplace. By learning to recognize high-risk situations, they can ensure employees are not placed in assignments that compromise their safety.

RECORDKEEPING AND PROGRAM EVALUATION

Recordkeeping and evaluation of the violence prevention program are necessary to determine its overall effectiveness and identify deficiencies or changes that should be made.

An effective workplace violence prevention program will improve morale and productivity and reduce workers' compensation costs. Employers who would like help in implementing an appropriate workplace violence prevention program can contact the Occupational Safety and Health Administration Consultation Service provided in their state, public safety officials, insurers, human resource and employee assistance professionals.

Please be sure to read the second part of this series on training tips for dealing with a violent individual, including how to respond to gunfire in the workplace in the next edition of *Quality Improvement for Nursing Facilities.*

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