



VIOLENCE IN THE SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITY WORKPLACE

Part Two: Staff Training Tips

Gunfire is the last sound you would expect to hear in a nursing home. Yet, that is what the residents and staff of Pinelake Health and Rehab in Carthage, N.C., encountered one tragic Sunday morning in 2009 when a lone gunman entered the facility and randomly killed seven residents and one nurse. Thankfully, the brutal attack was stopped by the heroic efforts of a local police officer.

While the odds of being involved in an active shooter incident are remote, non-fatal assaults and violent acts of aggression from personnel, residents, family members and visitors are on the rise. With such potentially catastrophic consequences, it makes good sense to spend some time now thinking and preparing for it.

Law enforcement officials recommend three basic approaches to preventing workplace violence:

1. Administrative/organizational: developing programs, policies, and work practices aimed at maintaining a safe working environment.
2. Control the environment: adjusting lighting, entrances and exits, security hardware and other engineering controls to discourage would-be assailants.
3. Behavioral/interpersonal: training staff to anticipate recognize and respond to conflict and potential violence in the workplace.

The first two approaches were discussed in [Part One: Developing a Corporate Prevention Program](#) (PDF) of this series. Part Two will focus on the third approach by offering specific training tips for dealing with a violent individual (e.g., resident, employee, family members, or a visitor), including how to respond to gunfire in the workplace.

BASIC VIOLENCE PREVENTION SAFETY TIPS FOR HEALTH CARE WORKERS

Watch for signals that may be associated with impending violence:

- Verbally expressed anger and frustration.
- Body language, such as threatening gestures.
- Signs of drug or alcohol use.
- Presence of a weapon.

Maintain a behavior that helps diffuse anger:

- Present a calm, caring attitude.
- Be polite and don't match the threats or give orders.
- Accept criticism in a positive way.
- Speak slowly, softly, and clearly.
- Listen to what the person is saying and encourage them to talk.
- Acknowledge the person's feelings (e.g. "I know you are frustrated").
- Inform the person you sincerely care and will do all in your power to help. However, avoid challenging, bargaining or making promises you cannot keep.
- Ask questions to help regain control of the conversation.
- Help him or her reduce large problems into smaller, manageable ones.
- Monitor your body language and avoid any behavior that may be interpreted as aggressive (e.g., moving rapidly, getting too close, touching, or speaking loudly).

Avoid distractions, and instead focus your attention on the person so you know what he or she is doing at all times.

Be alert:

- Evaluate each situation for potential violence when you enter a room or begin to relate to a resident or visitor.
- Be vigilant throughout the encounter.
- Don't isolate yourself with a potentially violent person.
- Position yourself at right angles of the person instead of standing directly in front of him or her.
- If possible, maintain a distance of 3-6 feet from the person.
- Always keep an open path for exiting – don't let the potentially violent person stand between you and the door.
- Move away from heavy or sharp objects that can be used as a weapon. If you see a potential weapon in the room, avoid staring at it, which may give the person the idea to use it.
- If a weapon is involved, ask the person to place it in a neutral location while you continue talking. Avoid trying to disarm the person, which may put you in danger.

Take these steps if you can't diffuse the situation quickly:

- Ask the person to leave and return when he or she is calmer or remove yourself from the situation.
- Call security for help.
- Report any violent incidents to your management.

If gunfire is heard in the workplace:

- Determine if there is a path of escape and quickly move toward it, bringing others with you, as able.
- Leave belongings behind.
- Call 911 and tell authorities what you heard and saw, state location, description of assailant and number and type of weapons (if known).
- If you are unable to escape, find a hiding place that's well protected and hidden. Avoid places that restrict movement.
- If possible, find a unit or room that can be locked with objects to hide behind.
- Block door with heavy furniture.
- Turn out lights; become totally silent and turn off noise-producing devices
- Do not huddle together, but instead spread-out.
- Remain calm (your behavior effects others); keep others focused on survival.
- Quietly develop a plan of action in the event the shooter enters.
- If the shooter enters and there is no escape, assume shooter's intentions are lethal and be prepared to do whatever it takes to neutralize the threat by throwing things, yelling, use improvised weapons, etc.

There are supplemental resources available through state and local workplace safety organizations and safety programs, such as "Shots Fired – When Lightning Strikes" at <http://www.shotsfiredvd.com> to help enhance your corporate violence prevention training.

DEALING WITH RESIDENT VIOLENCE

As nursing homes admit more residents with Alzheimer's disease, psychiatric disorders, and other conditions often associated with challenging behaviors, staff are faced with increasing incidents of resident violence. The most commonly encountered forms of resident to staff violence include:

- Grabbing and scratching.
- Striking out, hitting.
- Pushing, shoving.
- Throwing/breaking objects.

Staff training is vital and should include the following:

- Education on the disorder or disease process related to senior populations.
- Identification of triggers that can evoke a challenging behavior.
- Basic techniques and strategies for interacting with the resident.

DEALING WITH ANGRY FAMILY MEMBERS OR VISITORS

Few families have placed their loved one in a nursing home or assisted living environment without some degree of guilt. Unfortunately, when a resident's condition deteriorates, family members can quickly forget the reason for admission was the onset of decline. In turn, guilt may boil over into anger and blame against the facility and staff. As a result, staff tendency is to run the other way when difficult family members enter the building, which only serves to validate the family member's perception of them as indifferent and uncaring.

To remedy the problem, facilities need to train staff on how to effectively deal with difficult people through good customer service. See this [customer service training tips](#) (PDF) article from GuideOne Risk Resources for Health Care.

DEALING WITH DISGRUNTLED STAFF

How many times have you read newspaper accounts of a disgruntled employee's violent acts against his workplace only to learn afterwards that his co-workers had long seen warning signs? Unfortunately, too often managers are uncomfortable addressing problem behaviors, and their failure to do so only allows the problem to escalate until it's out of control.

Managers need to take any direct or veiled threats from staff seriously. According to Bonifazi¹, warning signs include the following:

- Intimidating behavior
- Inability to take suggestions or criticism
- Holding grudges
- Rivalry with a group or person
- Being obsessed with the job or with a romantic interest
- Carrying, discussing or showing weapons
- History of violence

To keep behavioral problems from escalating, managers should consider the following:

- Don't ignore, excuse, gossip or interpret bad behavior, but instead document these behaviors and suggest outside counseling where appropriate.
- At the first sign of problem behavior, meet with the employee to express your concern and inquire if things are alright. Point out the behavior is out of character and unacceptable and then discuss and encourage reasonable and acceptable behaviors.
- If the problem behavior continues, meet again with the employee to state your concerns and to place them on probation, giving details of what is expected and how you will follow-up.
- Employees who don't change their behavior by the end of the probation period or who commit an act of violence should be terminated immediately. Be prepared to handle the termination in a safe manner by consulting with your human resource and legal representative. You may be best advised to suspend the employee for one day pending an investigation in order to get the employee off the premises.
- Terminations should include a clear statement the employee is no longer welcome on the premises and a return will be considered trespassing and lead to arrest. Alert other employees to call the police if that happens, and keep local law enforcement abreast.

In summary, training staff to anticipate, recognize, and respond to conflict and potential violence in the workplace is your best defense against harmful acts in your facility.

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You are encouraged to consult with your own attorney or other expert consultants for a professional opinion specific to your situation.



¹ Bonifazi, W. (1999, April). Going Postal. *Contemporary Long Term Care*. 30.