



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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Difficult...to...DANGEROUS

Tips for preventing, responding to, and recovering from workplace violence

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At the mention of workplace violence, most people imagine dramatic and rare situations from the news— an enraged gunman shoots eight of his co-workers despite the best efforts of police, for example. However, workplace violence can include any physical assault, threatening behavior, or verbal abuse occurring at work or on duty, making it a far-reaching and common problem.

Luckily, there are ways to help manage potentially violent situations and people, making these difficult situations less threatening to the lives, emotions, and health of everyone. Advance knowledge of this information is necessary, so you will be prepared when a situation arises. Make time to read and share the procedures necessary to prevent, respond to, and recover from incidents of workplace violence. We'll give you a head start by providing some food for thought in this article.

Fending off difficult situations

The ability to respect others' differences will go a long way toward understanding and dealing with problems in the workplace. Respect for all people is a key part of successful interaction with others, regardless of culture, background, physical

appearance, thoughts, ideas, expressions, attitudes, or beliefs. Treat others with dignity, and don't classify them or act according to assumptions or stereotypes.



Communicating effectively is another obvious part of interaction with others, but it is one that is often overlooked. In addition to behaviors such as maintaining eye contact and giving people their space, it is important to remember to use cooperative language

without criticism, accusations or making light of the situation. Communicating as an equal is essential to establishing mutual respect between people.

Above all, though, it is necessary to remain calm in potentially difficult situations. Being threatening yourself is certainly not going to diffuse any tension, and may provoke violence in situations that could be handled in a calm, controlled manner.

What is a difficult situation?

A difficult situation is when a person has directed his frustration and anger at you or your agency, but is not a direct threat to anyone's safety. Two strategies for dealing with difficult situations are *avoiding* and *diffusing*.

Avoiding is a technique in which you decide to take no action because taking action may be more costly

than overlooking the situation. Only avoid a situation if it is minor or inconsequential or will quickly go away on its own. Avoidance is not a first choice, but one that should be used when other approaches are unlikely to succeed. A situation should never be avoided if the conflict could escalate or if the person persists in pressing the issue.

Defusing the situation is a technique that uses communication to engage a difficult person and help resolve the conflict. Acknowledge the person's feelings in a respectful tone of voice, and paraphrase his own words rather than saying "I understand," which may come across as patronizing. Ask open-ended questions to help keep the situation from becoming emotional. Offer help by breaking down big problems into smaller problems, if possible, or offer to call in additional resources, such as someone outside the situation and/or a person in a superior position.

Giving the person a choice, with consequences, can be a more forceful but still cooperative way to modify a difficult situation. In a non-threatening tone, present two choices and their consequences, ending on a positive note. Here's an example: "Sir, company policy prohibits you from playing your radio while on the vehicle. If you continue to play the radio we will not move, or you can turn it off and take a seat and you can get to where you want

to go.”

What is a dangerous situation?

A dangerous situation is one in which a person poses an immediate threat to the safety of you or others. In a dangerous situation, your priority should be preserving your own safety, because you cannot call for assistance or help others if you are injured. Use common sense and know your limitations. Take time now to become familiar with your agency's emergency and self-defense procedures and laws; they won't do you any good if they're filed away unread in the back of a drawer.

Most important, do not try to deal with a dangerous situation alone. Call for help, if possible. Make sure to give your emergency contact as much relevant information as possible to ensure an appropriate response.

Identify yourself with your first and last name, including your ID or badge number if appropriate. Give your exact location, including room number if you are in a building, and driving directions to your location if you are on the road. Be specific about the type of assistance you need, and explain the situation with any information that might be helpful to those trying to help from outside the site.

Warning signs of violence

Most violent behavior follows a period of warning signs, which are often ignored until it is too late. However, not all “warning signs” indicate a future violent act; as such, you should not label those who exhibit them as “dangerous.” If you notice warning signs of possible violent behavior, tell a supervisor or other person of authority so that existing issues can be solved before they escalate.

Warning signs include an unusual interest in weapons or violence, increased depression, increased problems at work such as absenteeism or overreacting to criticism, or signs of violence at home. Other concerns are

sudden emotional outbursts, unwarranted anger, threats, or intimidation.

Getting help

Workplace violence has a detrimental effect, of course, on its victims, such as physical or psychological injury, increased fear or stress, absenteeism, and disruptions in personal or family life. However, even those who are not direct victims are still negatively affected. Employees who know the victim(s), work in the same facility, or work in similar circumstances can also



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suffer from psychological trauma and increased fear and stress, resulting in loss of productivity.

The primary impact of workplace violence, on a broad scale, is stress. Stress can be expressed physically; a person may experience difficulty in breathing, elevated blood pressure, or sweating and chills. Manifested emotionally, stress surfaces as fear, panic, guilt, depression, grief, or irritability. Psychological symptoms of stress include hypersensitivity, paranoid thoughts, poor concentration, and disorientation or confusion. Stress may even cause some people to withdraw from society or experience interrupted sleep patterns or substance abuse.

If workplace violence affects you or someone you know, it is important to seek help. Managers or supervisors, human resources representatives, union representatives, family members and friends, support groups, and medical providers are all good places to seek assistance. Addressing the impact of workplace violence is critical for employee morale, and may even help prevent violence in the future.

Helpful resources

The Employee Guide to Workplace Violence, produced by the National

Transit Institute, is an excellent pocket guide to assist employees in recognizing potential workplace violence, with tips for managing difficult and dangerous situations. To obtain a copy of the pocket guide, see page 15 of this newsletter. To receive multiple copies for distribution to your employees, go to the NTI Web site at www.ntionline.com/products/asp and place your order.

Source: *Employee Guide to Workplace Violence*. National Transit Institute, 2003.

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