



VITALS

A Weekly Safety Newsletter For Medical Transport Professionals

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Workplace Violence: Is Medical Transportation Immune?

From headlines and personal experience, we all know that medical transportation is inherently dangerous. The statistics in previous "Vitals" articles can be summarized by stating that if you work in EMS, you have a two and a half times greater likelihood of being killed at work than if you don't work in EMS. Our colleagues in the non-EMS end of medical transportation are at risk as well. The most common cause of death and injury is a motor vehicle crash. A less common, but very real risk is workplace violence.

In this turbulent economy, cutbacks, terminations and pressures for higher productivity are rampant. It is an understatement to say that every workplace has become more stressful. Some estimates place the incidence of PTSD, anxiety and depression in our industry at around 20%. One could argue that the very nature of our workplace makes it more volatile.



OSHA estimates that about 2 million workers are victims of workplace violence annually. A recent Bureau of Labor Statistics survey revealed that 70 percent of workplaces have no violence prevention program. Naturally, the most common form of fatal workplace violence occurs during a robbery attempt. But what can we do to prevent workplace violence among employees? A simple approach to workplace violence prevention includes awareness, zero tolerance and emergency preparedness.

Employees are the lifeblood of any organization. If they perceive that the "company" doesn't value them or truly appreciate their efforts, they become disgruntled and foster a hostile work environment. If they do not feel respected when things are going well, how are they going to feel when they have their hours shortened, wages frozen or lose their jobs? I used the words "they" and "their" intentionally. They are not only wrong words; they represent a bad mentality. Any description of the relationship between the management team and the workforce should use the words "we" and "us". We need to be aware of each other. Those who study workplace violence estimate that warning signs are present in most cases before an event. The warning signs are anger, changes in hygiene, attendance issues and depression.

Zero tolerance is not negotiable and not confined to overtly hostile behaviors or physical contact. I had a situation where two employees were making a tactile assessment of each other's testosterone, jokingly to a point. Employee "A" poked employee "B" in the chest with his finger. Employee "B" told "A" to stop. "A" didn't. "B" grabbed his finger and broke it, perhaps unintentionally. I had both of them fired. Unlawful touching and a violent response are both unacceptable behaviors. Sometime later, the lady who was my wife at the time worked in the office of our ambulance service. She got in a shouting match with her supervisor. The supervisor remained calm and immediately had me involved, since I was the only member of senior management around. I separated them, calmed them down, listened to their stories and ended up firing my wife. (She became my ex-wife much later, for reasons not relating to this). It is surprising that after a workplace violence event, only about 10% of organizations get involved in developing a workplace violence prevention program. In my case, other than maintaining zero tolerance, nothing was initiated after the two events I described above, not exactly a paragon of preparedness.

There are many factors to consider when preventing workplace violence. Is each of your facilities secure? When terminating someone, is it done in a fashion that allows him/her to keep their self-respect? Is there a process in place that identifies terminated employees to the workforce? Would your folks know what to do if a gunman was roaming your workplace? Have you consulted local law enforcement to help you develop a plan? Did you know that if you do not take reasonable steps to prevent workplace violence, it might be an OSHA citable offense?

With time, effort and money, background checks, security assessments and the development of violence prevention plans may contribute in decreasing the likelihood of workplace violence. However, in the end, in these excruciatingly difficult days, maybe showing true empathy and respect for each other is the most effective violence eliminator of all.

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