

CATALYST

Business EXPERTise

Recognized and respected issue experts from PA Chamber member companies answer businesses' most frequently asked questions about HR, Tax, Communications and Environmental concerns, compliance and best practices.

HR

With so many news reports involving workplace violence, is there anything a company can do to prevent those issues at work?

According to the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), some 2 million people are victims of workplace violence every year; homicide is listed as the fourth-leading cause of occupational deaths. While much of the violence is perpetrated by outsiders, i.e. robberies, far too much is the result of conflicts between employees or between employees (or ex-employees) and management.

Although many tragedies are avoidable only in hindsight, there are measures that all employers can take to reduce the risk of such events. First, employers should establish and maintain a program to prevent workplace violence to ensure that employees are aware of how to respond to potentially violent situations before they escalate. The best protection is to establish a zero-tolerance policy—a written policy that specifically prohibits all types of workplace violence and threats of violence.

All employees should be trained on how to recognize the risk factors for potentially violent situations and how to avoid and diffuse those situations. Training should also include specifics on how to report a potentially dangerous and/or violent

workplace situation, and to whom to report those situations. Employers should establish a workplace violence prevention team that includes individuals from various departments, such as human resources, management, security and legal.

Any program must also include emergency procedures to use in the event of a violent situation. Procedures must be put into place to quickly respond to and defuse incidents. The program should also have an established response team that is able to control the situation and assist others to safety.

There are additional measures that employers can take to help keep their workplaces safe. Where appropriate to the business, video surveillance, extra lighting, alarm systems and means to minimize access by outsiders, through identification badges or security guards, should be considered. Also, since tragic events often result from employees under stress or those with substance or alcohol abuse issues, an employer should consider implementing an Employee Assistance Program. Such a program provides employees with a confidential support service with trained counselors able to work through and prevent workplace violence issues.

The development of a workplace violence prevention program not only makes good sense, but may avoid potential legal exposure if an unfortunate event should occur. OSHA



Ronda O'Donnell
Marshall Dennehey

has the authority to cite employers for workplace violence. In addition, employers may also be subject to lawsuits by victims' families after tragic situations unfold. If recent headlines are any indication of future trends, all employers must be aware and prepared to address workplace violence before it strikes. ♦

■ **Ronda O'Donnell** is a shareholder and Chair of the Employment Law Practice Group at Marshall Dennehey Warner Coleman & Goggin. She focuses her practice on the representation of employers and has handled hundreds of cases covering a full range of employment law issues in federal and state courts and before the administrative agencies. She also advises and trains employers on compliance with local, state and federal employment laws. She can be reached directly at 215 575-2697 or at rkodonnell@mdwecg.com.